

TOTAL GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL
BY COMPUTER!
IMPOSSIBLE? OUTRAGEOUS?
OR SIMPLY INEVITABLE?

THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER

STEVE GALLAGHER



In answer to his inquiry the youth in the magnamarket had rudely pointed to one of the information centres scattered around the

store, but Mitchell persisted.

'I don't want to talk to a machine. I . . . I want something a little more . . . unofficial.' The youth's eyes lit up. 'Now you're talking, pal. What you after? Piece of beef, pork perhaps? It'll cost you mind.' Mitchell hurriedly denied looking for real

meat and told the surprised youth what he

was looking for.

'Music! You're looking for music!' 'Anything I can do for you, sir? I'm the Branch Manager.' The figure had emerged following the boy's outburst.

'Yes. I wondered if you could tell me where the background music in your store came

from?

The manager was taken aback. 'The music? Well . . . er . . . Central Command I suppose. where else?'

Central Command . . . the giant computerized headquarters of government, all government. It supplied music, food, clothing, a place to live, everything a human being could possibly need. Everything that is except freedom.

Look out for Books 2 and 3 in
THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER trilogy
to be published shortly by CORGI BOOKS

Steve Gallagher

The Last Rose of Summer

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The Last Rose of Summer



CHAPTER ONE

THE city had spread, over-reached itself and was beginning to die. There was little traffic, and the chattering of the helicopter carried clearly through the still air. The pilot was young, and flew with the arrogance of a newly-acquired but much-practised skill; he kept the 'copter below the roof level of the taller blocks and weaved a course between them. The swinging motion as the craft dipped to the left and right did nothing to temper Randall's inherent nervousness of flying, and his knuckles grew white as they gripped the edge of the sealed Police Elité briefcase. The pilot was grinning, and every few seconds glanced across to see his reaction to the latest heart-stopping manoeuvre. Randall's composure almost went as the side of a building raced to meet them and then shot past, seemingly only inches from the plastic bubble; windows zipped by in a stroboscopic blur and then they were out above the wide city again and flying level.

If the pilot felt a boyish disappointment, he did not show it. Instead he tapped his combination microphone and headset and pointed behind the passenger seat. Randall forced his head to turn and saw a similar headset hanging ready for his use, so he reached for it onehanded, grunting slightly at the pressure of the restraining straps. Despite the microphone only an inch from his mouth, the pilot had to shout to be heard over the high-decibel clatter of the rotors.

'Sixty years old, this crate,' he said, taking his hand off the control column to gesture about the cramped cockpit. 'Oldest on the force. They can't afford to build any more.'

Randall nodded in what he hoped was an agreeable manner, but he felt his reserves of phlegmatic calm draining

through a small hole somewhere deep inside. Fixing his eyes on the horizon he tried to imagine the solidity of concrete beneath him, but the unfulfilled wish only made his present agonies worse and he lapsed instead into contemplation of the unrolling cityscape. The pilot threw another glance and a grin, but at least he desisted from his hedge-hopping showmanship.

It was easy, at this height, to distinguish the dead wood from the merely diseased or dying. The tower blocks, their services long broken down and irreparable, were for the most part deserted, and close up it was possible to see past the reflection of the 'copter on the sightless windows into the gutted offices and apartments behind. However such views were so brief as to be dizzying; far easier on the eye were the sprawling developments of seven stories and less which were slowly decaying in their brothers' shadows. Beyond the acres of citizens' housing was the glint of the river in the afternoon sun, and beyond that the underbelly, petering out into thin brown fields and the crumbling circles of the disused spaceport.

The 'copter jerked and bobbed suddenly as if on the end of an invisible leash; as it hung momentarily weightless it turned about its own centre and then roared into a dive towards the widening canyon of a broad city street. The pilot's grin remained but there were no sideways looks as he levelled off at two hundred feet and sped down the boulevard. The glass walls of the artificial valley's sides shot past in a blur of detail and it seemed to Randall that they were diving into a narrow shaft of infinite depth. Even through the headset the noise was far too loud as its battering was reflected back at them, and as its pitch changed with each widening intersection he felt a rolling followed by a minute correction as the change in airflow came and went.

Randall felt the tension ebbing away, his depths of fear and wonder finally explored and exhausted, and he concentrated instead on the glittering reflection of the river which caught the sun and spilled up on to the windows at the far end of the convent. The chimmering light seemed to spread and reach

to envelop them at an impossible speed, stars danced on the 'copter's bubble as they were out and climbing. The brief moment of weightlessness returned as they swivelled and dived into the final run parallel to the water towards the Police Elité main building. Randall found that his fingers were hurting from his grip on the briefcase and so he straightened them, one by one.

The great golden dome of Central Command lay before and below them, straddling the river. It shone in the afternoon light like a bright jewel amidst the dross of the city, dwarfing even the library annexe on its north side. Randall saw the 'copter's shadow rising to meet them as the ascending curve of the dome slid beneath, and then the world

tilted and the dome was gone.

Nose-up, the 'copter dropped towards its target, a white cross within a circle painted on the roof of the Police Elité building. They had to stand off for a little less than a minute whilst another 'copter lifted and circled from the same roof, and then they continued their downward progress to within a few feet of the asphalt surface.

Randall looked across at the pilot as he struggled to make a steady hover in a slight crosswind. 'Why aren't we landing?'

he shouted into his microphone.

'Orders,' the pilot shouted back. 'This is as far as I can go.

They say the roof's starting to give way.'

With an inward sigh, Randall replaced the headset in its clasp and undid his restraining straps. He had to steady himself as he attempted to rise and a gust drifted the 'copter close to the roof's edge; he glimpsed a thin sliver of eternity beneath the runners before the pilot made the necessary correction and coasted back to the centre of the circle.

The downdraft whipped at his hair and clothing as he opened the door in the bubble and leaned out. The height of the hover was varying between three and four feet – not a bad jump, but an uncertain one. He dropped and landed heavily, hearing the door slam closed behind him in the slipstream. As he regained his feet the 'copter was gone, and the hot wash of its exhaust across the roof burned his eyes dry.

Fighting the nervous tremble in his legs and disoriented by temporary deafness, Randall used his Detective's pass to call the elevator which would drop him to the approximate level of his office.

From a window in a dusty museum in the shadows of the city, a wistful citizen watched the 'copter's ascent and wondered where it might be heading. His eyes followed as it turned on its axis and slid into forward motion, and even after it had dipped beyond the roofline he watched until the chattering of its rotors was no longer audible.

Mitchell turned from the window with a start as a strange jangling sound cut across the dry museum atmosphere and echoed off into distant corners, but he relaxed as he realized that a non-citizen attendant was only demonstrating an ancient mechanical piece to a visiting group of children. If he stood close by he might be able to listen to the guide's explanation, and on this impulse he crossed the uneven parquet floor and moved twards the far end of the hall.

The children's uniforms showed them to be from one of the baby farms, and their general build and features declared each to be a citizen's child as Mitchell himself had once been. Their close order and obedience was assured by a State Nanny who stood slightly apart from them with a dimly glowing static rod and watched for signs of misbehaviour. It seemed that the museums were still a part of the education programme; or wasn't it called a recreation programme now? Mitchell looked across at their serious little faces and saw that already several were listless and inattentive to the demonstration.

That jangling; Mitchell realized that it was an awful parody of music, like coins being rattled in an old can. The over-ornate melody ground to a creaking halt and the attendant made a move to start up the cycle again, at which the Nanny hurriedly marshalled her flock and directed them on towards the next piece of pointless edification. As they

moved, she spotted one child who detached herself from the group and moved towards the jangling-machine with a tiny wonder in her eyes, but a swift touch with the static rod on an outstreched hand had the girl blinking back tears as she

ran to rejoin her group.

The attendant shook his head as the muted patter of footsteps passed into the next hall and the tranquil mood music of the museum's loudspeakers filtered back into audibility. 'Wasteful,' he said, perhaps to Mitchell but equally possibly to nobody in particular. 'Little minds with big potential. And what do they do with them?'

'Tell me.'

The attendant turned abruptly and focussed into the gloom, perceiving Mitchell fully for the first time. His eyes took in the build, the colouring and the general citizen's features, and his common sense instructed him to change the subject, fast. He reached out and patted the tall wooden case next to him and said, 'I'll bet you've never seen one of these before, have you, sir?'

Mitchell looked, and saw that the case had a glass front protecting a broad punched metal disc. Across this was an arm resembling a metal comb, and in the shadows at the back of the case were some very primitive mechanics.

'I saw you demonstrating it before. It puts out quite a racket.'

If the attendant was offended, he didn't show it. 'It's called a Polyphon, sir. Mechanical music. People used to have them in their homes.'

'What on earth for?' Good lord, the thing was huge! And the repeating discord it put out could hardly be called music, especially when compared to the sweeter and more varied melodies piped everywhere by Central Command.

The attendant seemed to anticipate Mitchell's conclusion. 'Those were the days before public broadcasting, remember. If you didn't have music piped straight into your home, then this was the alternative. Of course, they played instruments as well.'

Surprise must have shown on Mitchell's face, for the

attendant carried on, 'Musical instruments, sir, like the early examples up on the fourth floor. Of course, they're only copies. You'd have to go to the 'Spacer Institute to see the real thing.'

'I saw the copies. I couldn't make out where the computer

was supposed to connect up.'

'That's the whole point, sir. If you run through the museum tourist tape you'll see that instruments were the primitive stage of music when the sounds were produced by hand. This Polyphon was an intermediate step before music became computer-generated. See, this metal disc even looks like a punched card. Same principle.'

Mitchell had never seen a punched card, but he let it pass.

'Musical instruments. What will they think of next?'

For no reason that Mitchell could see the attendant blinked and swallowed hard. But he was in his element; to see a citizen in the museum was rare, but to find one with even the mildest curiosity for anything at all was a remarkable event. Still with a shine in his eyes, the old man blinked again and said, 'Would you like to hear it all the way through, sir?'

'Are you sure it would stand the strain? It looks as if it's

ready to fall to pieces.'

'I'm afraid this is a copy as well, sir. Looks as flimsy as the original, but it's perfectly solid. If you wanted to see the real thing . . .'

"... I'd have to go to the 'Spacer Institute."

'Quite so, sir, and then of course it wouldn't be in working order.'

Mitchell gestured. 'Plug it in, then.'

'You may be surprised to learn that there's no electricity involved here. All mechanical, you see? The action was programmed to start when a member of the public put a penny in, and before you ask, a penny was a currency token about the size and weight of this metal disc.'

Mitchell knew perfectly well what a penny was, but said nothing. The machine clanked itself into readiness as the metal disc turned, and through the glass he saw the prongs of the comb flex and bend against its progress. Then the punched holes of the disc aligned with and passed beneath the prongs, and as they quivered free the disordered cacophony previously heard from the other side of the gloomy hall rang forth surprisingly loud.

Well ... perhaps not so disordered. On the second hearing it became easier to pick out the melody line from the excessive rippling of the counterpoint. It was still most unmusical as the rough harmonies contended at equal volume,

but at least . . . well, it was music, after a fashion.

Perhaps the little hand outstretched towards the machine a few moments earlier had been reaching for a deeper, less intellectualized understanding. Mitchell winced as he thought of the brief flash of the static rod, well remembered from his own fourteen years at the baby farm. The attendant was watching the disc turn with almost fatherly pride, lost in a reverie of his own; old man and child had shared a common understanding, and Mitchell felt the irrational irritation of not belonging.

He backed away unnoticed, and headed for the main doors. As the noise of the Polyphon receded, the insidious music of Central Command again filtered through, so bland

as to be below the level of conscious attention.

Outside on the steps, he stood and watched in tense wonder as another Police Elité helicopter dropped in between the buildings at the far end of the boulevard over a mile away and began the bravado run at top speed down the concrete canyon. There was no navigational justification for the route, but nearly all the pilots did it, skimming the tops of the thin dead trees and making them bend and lose a few more dry leaves each time. Nobody could tell them to stop, for the pilots were an elité within an elité, and did much as they pleased. They manufactured more excitement for themselves in one afternoon than a citizen could hope to amass in a whole lifetime with all his hobbies and diversions.

The 'copter roared up and was gone in an instant, diving towards the river like a plummeting stone. Mitchell had caught a brief flash of the tableau within the 'copter's bubble; the pilot straining forward and grinning like a demon, his passenger frozen in an attitude of disbelief. He had watched the run so many times, envied its daring and feared its risks, and now he waited for the swooping climb across the water, invariably delayed until the last possible moment and then bursting up into the air like an explosion

of joy.

The pilot was in trouble. Impossible to see why, but the tail of the 'copter was swinging from side to side so that the machine repeatedly tilted and dipped in its headlong progress down the man-made ravine. It was almost too late when the pilot regained a measure of control; the crevasse opened out and the stunted trees of the riverside rushed at his runners as the 'copter's nose came up and cleared them; and then continued to rise, impossibly fast as the pilot fought the controls to follow through and soar out over the open river where a dignified ditching might at least be possible.

The flickering tailblades fouled in the uppermost branches, and the rising nose was thrown up and over. The 'copter somersaulted lazily, and as it reached the apex of its loop the whirling blades suddenly regained their bite on the air and slammed all the machinery down hard in the middle of the road. In the same instant fuel spurted and burned, and a cloud of black fire mushroomed out in all directions.

A moment of surprising quiet was cut by a second explosion which sent a rainbow of burning fuel high into the air. It settled to the angry whisper of distant fire and then gave way to the insipid background music programmed by Central Command, leaking from the building behind Mitchell.

He released his pent-up breath in a sigh of admiration. It had been most entertaining. The reconstruction on the evening bulletin would be nothing like as good.

On the way to Uncle Arthur's apartment, Mitchell glanced down a side street and saw the distant dome of Central Command. It gave him a guilty start; he had not visited the library facility for several months, and he felt that perhaps he should go, for the sake of appearance if nothing else. But he could raise no enthusiasm for the endless tapes of soap operas and space adventures; sitting at home before the three-sided screen with the windows shuttered gave him a headache, and he sometimes felt that he was more familiar with the repetition of production-line plots than the computer which wrote and performed them. On his last visit to the library he had been given a gentle reprimand for his neglect of the citizens' greatest privilege, and the prospect of facing yet again that blank console in the curtained booth and hearing displeasure in the fatherly voice of Central Command did little to entice him. His wife would be there, of course, collecting her usual armful of sloppy dramas, and perhaps that would be family representation enough.

He collected the suitcase and took it home. It was an ancient piece of luggage with broken hinges and two straps to replace them, and he was embarrassed to be seen with it. His shoulders ached from the strain of carrying when he finally arrived back at his own apartment block and managed awk-

wardly to jab the 'Call Lift' button with his elbow.

Mitchell turned suddenly as a blast of badly-tuned radio programming burst from the other side of the hall. Collinson, the block caretaker, had opened the door to his little glassed-in office and was shaking his head as he leaned out.

'Lift's gone again, I'm afraid, Mr. Mitchell,' he said. 'It'll have to be the stairs until we get the requisition to have it

fixed.'

Mitchell groaned inwardly and debated whether to leave the suitcase in Collinson's office and collect it when the lift was working again, but that would be a week at least on the past performance of Central Command's maintenance units. He thanked the caretaker, who nodded and withdrew into his hutch.

It was five floors, and the suitcase gained weight with each. He tiptoed quietly past the fourth floor to avoid arousing Grenbaum, an old and lonely tenant with an almost pathetic desire for any form of human company. Music was

playing loudly in the apartment by the stairwell, and Mitchell realized with relief that he could bounce down the stairs and still be unheard. He emerged on to the fifth level and dropped the luggage on to the grimy hall carpet to save him having to hunt one-handed for his key; he pressed it against the lock panel where the circuits conformed and released the door.

His wife was not home; undoubtedly at the Library, but he felt little concern. After all, their marriage had been mainly a ruse to get into a reasonable standard of apartment and away from the big citizens' dormitories, and as such it had served its purpose some years ago. The three-sided video surround was dark in the corner, and he went over to it and placed his hand on its control surface. It was still warm, so

she couldn't have been away long.

He dragged the suitcase into the middle of the main room and had difficulty undoing the straps. When he finally managed, the two sides of the bag burst apart and a great pile of trinkets and rubbish flowed out. One in particular, a bottle of bright amber liquid, caught his attention immediately and he rescued it before it could fall and break; this was undoubtedly the item that Uncle Arthur had specifically requested Mitchell find and bring to him at the convalescent home. It seemed a waste of effort to drag the whole case over a mile for the sake of a litre of some intoxicating drink, but Uncle Arthur had insisted. Mitchell placed the bottle on one side and began to sort through the rest of the rubbish; he found one article in particular of great interest.

There was a knock on the door, and he quickly pulled some torn wrapping plastic over his find. Within a second or so a wary head was thrust into the room, closely followed by the

rest of Baxter.

'Hello, Mitchell,' he said. 'Only me.'

Mitchell nodded acknowledgement and beckoned him in. Baxter's eyes lit upon the assortment in the middle of the room and he sidled over to it with ill-concealed interest. 'New hobby?'

A new hobby was the high point of Baxter's day-to-day

existence. He and Mitchell had been graduates of the same baby farm and had maintained their association ever since. Although the range of personality variations amongst the citizens was small, Mitchell and Baxter represented opposite extremes. Baxter's respect and apprehension towards Central Command were absolute, and he had lost little of the child's timidity with regard to its authority. This, however, was tempered with an equally juvenile curiosity, and Mitchell liked him for it.

The pile of trinkets drew him like a magnet, but he hovered outside their range. 'They're some things of my Uncle Arthur's,' Mitchell explained. 'He asked me to sort through them and take him some pieces to the convalescent home. There must be sixty years' worth of junk here.'

Baxter's eyes shone like a magpie's. 'You must have enough antique treasures there to start your own museum.

Speaking of which, how's Mrs. Mitchell?"

Mitchell gave a wry smile. 'She was quite pleasant last time we spoke. Central had given her some more of those slushy romantic tapes, and she was looking right through me. Now she's gone down to Riverside for some more.'

'Got to keep the workers happy, or whatever the saying is. As a matter of fact, that's why I called. I'm on my way to the

Library. I wondered if you felt like coming along.'

'Another time, perhaps. Bit busy.'

Baxter made no move to go, but stood there with a smile that was at once knowing and hopeful. 'Come off it, Mitchell,' he said. 'I wasn't born yesterday, you know.'

'What do you mean?'

'You're hiding something. I saw you cover it up when I came in.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

With a loud war whoop, Baxter pounced. The dive was illjudged and he landed in the rubbish, knocking Mitchell over and scattering dust and bric-a-brac. As he scrambled to his knees, he froze; the round spool of recording tape was rolling in a lazy and increasingly unsteady circle. Mitchell saw the horror on his face before the spool rattled on to the floor. 'Oh my God.' Baxter was ashen. 'Do you know what this is?'

'It's a tape.'

'It's a quarter-inch recording tape, that's all. And it's not in a cassette or anything. Do you realize you could be shot just for having this? I could be shot just for being here!'

'Don't be so melodramatic, Baxter.'

'This is an unauthorized message medium. The only kind of tape a citizen has access to is the kind in an official cassette produced by Central Command.'

Mitchell stood up and dusted himself off. You mean the

Library.'

'Call it what you like, it's the same bloody computer in any case. This could be called treason!'

'Look, I found it in the suitcase, that's all. It must have

been there for years.'

'Then it should have been handed in long ago.' Baxter was up off his knees and by the window, nervously scanning the street below.

'Well, what can I do about that?'

'Burn it. Bury it. Get rid of it somehow."

'But I don't even know what's on it.'

'And you don't want to know! There's no way we can play it back anyway!'

Mitchell was becoming exasperated. 'So where's the harm

in having it?'

'Central Command doesn't care about arguments like

that. If it thinks you're guilty ...?

'It looks like the same kind of tape they use in the audio cassettes.' Picking up the reel, Mitchell crossed to his bedroom and emerged a moment later with a standard Library audio cassette, whilst Baxter continued to see untold demons lurking in the peaceful scene outside.

'It probably is,' Baxter replied. 'It's produced under licence from Central Command. Every inch has to be accounted for and there are probably miles on that spool...'

'Hardly. I wonder if I could get it to run on my cassette

machine ... ?

Baxter glanced over his shoulder, and then looked again with dismay as he saw Mitchell tinkering with the official seal on the cassette. It hardly seemed possible, but his agitaton intensified. 'Don't even think of it!' he squeaked.

Mitchell stopped what he was doing and frowned. Look, Baxter, nobody asked you to interfere. As far as I'm concerned you can stroll off and pretend none of this hap-

pened.'

'But that will make no difference!' Baxter objected. 'They'll know I was here and they'll never believe I didn't see anything.'

"They? Who the hell are "They?" And how are "They"

supposed to know?"

'There could have been a satellite spot check . . .'

'Come off it. That's an old kid's story.'

'It's true!' Baxter insisted earnestly. 'They've got satellites up there that can hear a mouse fart from ten miles away, and Central Command can tell what kind of cheese it ate.'

'And what would Central Command care about a few feet

of mouldy old tape that nobody can play back?"

'You're talking ...' Baxter realized he was shouting, and he stopped abruptly and crossed to where Mitchell was prying at the seam of the cassette with his door key. He continued in a hoarse whisper, 'You're talking about trying it on a cassette machine.'

'I reckon it can be done if I open the cassette and spool the

tape into it.'

For a moment Baxter regarded the practicality of the situation with detached interest before remembering his apoplexy. 'Open a cassette? Do you realize what you're

saving?

'Calm down, Baxter, or you'll burst a blood vessel. These Library cassettes are only cheap plastic. You can prise them open easily without disturbing the seal. I've done it hundreds of times when a cassette's been tangled. Before you start, I know you're supposed to return any defective cassettes, but I'm sure hundreds must do it.' He increased the pressure with the key, and the two halves of the cassette popped

neatly apart exposing the bobbins and tension loops inside. 'You see? The seal stays in one piece.'

Baxter was impressed in spite of himself. 'So it does. But,

look here, Mitchell ...'

'No, you look here, Baxter. I've always valued you as a friend, but you barged into this of your own accord. Now you can either leave and forget all about this or you can hang around while I see it through. I'm going to try to see what's on this tape and when I've done that I'll put the cassette back together and nobody will be any the wiser. Unless, of course, your satellite spy has dragged its attention away from farting mice for five minutes to see what the rabble are up to. In which case we were doomed the moment I opened that suitcase...'

The knock came at that moment, loud and insistent at the door. Mitchell couldn't remember whether the catch had caught as Baxter closed it behind him, but as the second knock came, harder this time, at least it didn't swing open. Baxter looked around like a hunted animal, and felt the faintest surge of hope as he saw through the open door of Mitchell's bedroom the railings of the fire escape outside the window. But even as he thought, he realized it was a futile hope! The efficiency of the Police Elité as Central Command's executive was legendary, and so obvious an exit was bound to be blocked.

Mitchell swallowed, and tried to breathe evenly; after all, it might be nothing. It might be ... well, almost anything ... except that he couldn't think of anything. He saw Baxter retreat towards the wall furthest from the door and reach behind him for the comfort of its solidity, and so he moved forward and reached hesitantly for the opening panel. His hand hovered over the glowing surface and he looked up to meet Baxter's gaze; Baxter nodded slowly, aware that there was nothing else that he could suggest.

The mechanism hummed and the door swung inward a few inches as the fields disengaged. Outside in the corridor a moon-like face with pebble-glasses peered up at him and smiled uncertainly. It was a moment before Mitchell could speak.

'Mr. Greenbaum,' he said. 'What can I do for you?' There was a loud whistle of relief from the room behind him. The little man seemed not to hear it.

'I was wondering if you might like to come down to my flat later.' Greenbaum's voice was slightly accented; unusual in a citizen, but then he was one of a much earlier generation than Mitchell where the range of physical types was quite wide, so perhaps there were other differences as well.

'That's very kind,' Mitchell replied, moving to block the

doorway as Greenbaum tried to peek around him.

'I've had the flat put on the new Public Broadcast Line,' the little man went on, undaunted. 'You should really hear the quality.'

'I'd love to. I'll be pleased to call round sometime.' Mitchell waited, and so did Greenbaum, his insubstantial stock of opening salvos already exhausted. He smiled and nodded, and Mitchell did the same.

'Well, then,' he said finally, 'I'll perhaps see you later.'

'Yes, we'll arrange something,' replied Mitchell, and the conversation was over and the door closed. Mitchell turned and saw that Baxter was sheepishly stirring the discarded wrapping-paper with the toe of his shoe. 'Satellite spotcheck!' he said scornfully as he walked back over to where he had pulled a heap of trinkets over the cassette and spool. 'You'll have me as nervous as you are, if I'm not careful.'

'I'm not nervous,' Baxter replied indignantly, 'I'm just ...

well, responsible.'

Mitchell's attention drifted from him and concentrated on the intricate process of removing one tight coil of tape from the cassette and replacing it with another. Baxter wanted to move closer and watch, but he hovered at a distance. 'I still can't say I like it.'

'Don't say anything, then.' Mitchell began hand-turning the bobbin to take up the new tape, which wobbled on un-

evenly. 'Damn,' he said, 'it won't wind straight.'

Baxter hovered a little closer. 'Your tape's too slack.'

'Sorry?'

You haven't got enough tension. I'll hold it while you wind it on.'

Baxter gave a quick, timid smile and took the spool. 'Thanks.'

Mrs. Mitchell was still two hundred yards from the entrance as she approached the Library, but she was already in the shadow thrown by Central Command's dome in the afternoon sun. She joined the short queue at the turnstiles and quickly passed through the security procedure into the main hall. It was wide and low-ceilinged, not unlike the disused passenger lounges at the old spaceport, but the visual impression barely registered with her; she followed a familiar route across half an acre of floor to the broad steps which led to the mezzanine and the fiction terminals.

The mezzanine was far more crowded than the main floor level. Citizens of all ages but of the same basic appearance passed before and behind her with armloads of tapes identical to her own. In spite of the crowd she had little trouble finding a vacant booth. She sat down, sliding the door closed behind her, and the echo and shuffle of the broad hall was lost in the stuffy acoustic of the booth's interior.

It was narrow – a minimum space – but comfortable. A low hum seeming to come from nowhere and everywhere at the same time, denoted that the Central Command computer was aware of her presence, and the mirror directly opposite her at eye-level thinned and became transparent to

reveal the glow of a single camera eye.

'Good afternoon, and welcome to the Library facility of Central Command.' Again, the voice seemed to surround and contain her. It was deep and well-modulated, with a tone that was paternal and affectionate. 'Please place your borrower's card in the slot in front of you and state your name. Remember that to give a false identification is an offence.'

'Mitchell, Mrs.'

'You are identified, Mrs. Mitchell. Good afternoon.'

'Good afternoon.' She retrieved her borrower's card from the slot and looped it back on to the cord around her neck.

'And what can the Library do for you, Mrs. Mitchell?'

'I've come to return these tapes and to get some new ones.'

'Please place your tapes in the delivery chute on your left.' On cue, a flap popped open with a hiss of compressed air and she obediently slotted the cassettes into it. The lid smacked closed again and a soft whoosh was evidence that the computer was using a vacuum chamber to suck a loop of tape from each in turn and give it a spot-check.

'Ah,' the voice said, 'three dramas and a hobby tape. Tell me, Mrs. Mitchell, how did you enjoy "The Shivering

Willows"?"

'Very much, thank you.'

'We find it is one of our most popular choices. So moving. I shall note your remarks for future recommendation.'

'I watched it twice.'

'So I see. Please remember to rewind the tape next time, Mrs. Mitchell.'

She gave a guilty start. 'Oh . . . I'm sorry.'

'Please don't worry about it, Mrs. Mitchell. Just make sure you rewind all the tapes next time. Now, what else did we have? I see you borrowed "Arabic Passion" for the second time.'

'If you remember, you suggested it to me.'

'Of course I remember, Mrs. Mitchell. We never forget anything. How is your husband?' The tone of the voice remained the same as it effortlessly switched subjects.

'Quite well, I suppose. We don't often talk.'
'So you said last time. Where is he now?'

'He was out somewhere when I left the flat. I've no idea what he was doing.' Her eyes were fixed on the chute where her new selections would be delivered, and she began to wish as she did on every visit that the computer would cut short the friendly conversation.

'How much did you enjoy "Gangster's Moll"?'

She warmed at the memory. 'Quite a lot. I've always liked historical romances.'

'He hasn't been into the Library for three months now.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Your husband. I was wondering why he had not visited us

recently.'

Now she began to grow impatient, but knew she dared not show it. Instead she stared longingly at the empty chute, and replied without much enthusiasm, 'I wouldn't know. He goes in for walks, museums, that kind of thing. He has a friend.'

'Name?'

'Baxter, I think. Yes, Baxter. I've only seen him a couple

of times, but I think they're old friends.'

'May I suggest some new tapes for your enjoyment.' A hiss of air announced the welcome arrival of a cassette in the chute, 'Here is "Her Heart on Her Sleeve, a tender drama set in the world of retail management". I'm sure you'll find it very illuminating.'

'I'm sure I will.'

'Where does Baxter live?' This time, the sudden switch caught her slightly off-guard.

'Lilac Tree Mansions,' she faltered. 'Across the street from

our block.'

'Here is your second selection. It is called "Susan of the Steelworks". Does Baxter work?'

'No. He's a citizen.' Mrs. Mitchell removed the cassette

and looked eagerly for the next one.

'I see. This is "Her Trust Rewarded, a Romantic Tale of Old Tyneside". I think for hobbies this month we'll try you on rug-making. Here are the instructions—' another cassette appeared '—and use your Library card to collect the materials from Library stores.'

'Thank you.' They could join the untouched pile of hobby materials already accumulated in one corner of her bedroom. Now she needed no occupations; she had her drama tapes.

'Ask your husband to call on us more often,' the voice purred. 'We would hate to see him fall idle.'

'He seems to find plenty to occupy himself.'

'I am sure he must. Unfortunately, such occupations can so often turn out to be of a disagreeable nature. Ask him to call on us.'

'I will.'

'Tell him we have new material to interest him. Tell him we remember his tastes, we remember his appetites. Tell him we never forget . . . anything.'

'I'll tell him.'

The voice of Central Command became more businesslike. 'Please take your final selection from the delivery chute on your right. The library division of Central Command thanks you for your visit, Mrs. Mitchell. We look forward to your return.'

The hum subsided, and the light died in the camera eye. She was left facing her own reflection in the mirror, and the noise of the world outside began to penetrate the door.

New tapes. Three whole days of bliss in the best of all possible worlds! She slid the door open and hurried out across the mezzanine.

'Damn!' Mitchell cursed between clenched teeth. 'I'll never get it closed!'

Baxter knelt and inspected the narrow gap between the two halves of the cassette as Mitchell failed despite his strength to force them closer. 'Yes you will,' he urged. 'You're almost there. Press a bit harder.'

'If I press any harder I'll break the bobbin inside, and then we'll have problems. Opening the cassette was much easier.'

'More weight on the left,' Baxter was saying as a resounding snap announced a successful closure. Baxter applauded and Mitchell waved the cassette triumphantly over his head like a championship trophy.

They carried it over to the video-surround and positioned it in the audio slot. Mitchell programmed in the threading operation, and as power was drawn into the now cold apparatus a small panel lit which read 'machine not ready'. As they waited for it to blink out, Baxter said, 'I can hear music from somewhere.'

'It's out on the hallways. They're piping it all over the building. It's only supposed to be for the public areas, but you hear it everywhere. We'll just have to boost the volume on the playback to cover it.' He slid the volume control up a couple of notches.

'What do you think it is?'

Mitchell couldn't help his amusement. You're very eager, seeing you were about to commit ritual suicide about half an hour ago.'

'The sooner we get it over with, the sooner you can remake that cassette and burn the tape. But I can't help it if I'm curious.'

The warning panel went abruptly blank, and then flashed a 'ready' light. Mitchell pressed for playback, and nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" Baxter asked, his voice coloured by a

combination of disappointment and apprehension.

'I'm not sure. It's so old, perhaps there's no guide track to line it up on. How would I know?' And he jiggled the plastic case in the slot, hopefully.

'Perhaps there's nothing ...' began Baxter, and his words were lost in a thunderclap which burst from the unit's

speakers and rolled across the room.

Mitchell snatched at the volume control, missed it completely and banged skin off his knuckles. Baxter dropped to the floor and covered his ears; a rather extreme reaction, Mitchell thought. It was loud, but not so physically overpowering. The rumbling thunder ran on as a rhythm and a finely differentiated set of tones welled up against it in a secondary rhythm, harmonizing and separating, interweaving and overlapping but never losing step with the basic velvet pulsation.

Sucking the broken skin on the back of his hand, Mitchell understood. This was music; not the smooth and bland mixture he had always known but a raw, more primitive form. It

had the roughness and imperfection that had so annoyed him in the museum machine, but it overcame these faults with its massive delivery of unharnessed power. Perhaps these sounds were the hand-operated instruments that the attendant had made reference to; but it seemed impossible, the levels of individual skill and group co-operation that would be required to orchestrate a message of such force and vibrancy.

But there it was, blasting out in the little room. Baxter tugged at Mitchell's sleeve and his lips said, 'What is it?'

Mitchell leaned close to Baxter's ear and bawled 'It's music. I've never heard anything like it.'

"Turn it off!" Baxter pleaded. 'It frightens me!"

'I'm going to hear it through.'

'It's so loud. Somebody's going to report us. You wife will

be back any minute!'

Mitchell made no reply, but threw back his head and began to laugh. To experience the sound was like riding a white horse across the sky, an abrupt intoxication for unused reserves of emotion. He didn't care if it never stopped, for the ecstacy of the moment was eternal.

Baxter felt the flow of cool air on the back of his neck, and turned with a fearful start to look at the open door. Mitchell's wife stood framed in the doorway, her face contorted in rage and her key dangling from her free hand. She stepped into the room and the door slammed behind her, but even this did not disturb Mitchell. Then, impossible as it seemed, the edge of her voice sliced through the thundering bass in the air.

'Will you turn down that horrible noise? I said, turn it down!' And then she pounced across the room and yanked the cassette from its slot, spewing tape as the unthreading mechanism failed to match the abruptness of the action. She tossed it on to the floor, and there it lay in a heap of loose coils. She didn't once look at Mitchell as she switched the machine to video mode and inserted a cassette and he, only a couple of feet behind her, slowly raised his eyelids and gave her an even stare that was devoid of feeling.

The three wraparound screens flared into life with an aerial view descending on a quaint industrial complex. 'We present "Susan of the Steelworks",' boomed the speakers, 'a tale of soaring passion in the rolling mills. Come back with us now to a time when men were men and women were worshipped, for a tale of a tragic prisoner of love...'

It carried on in this fashion, and Baxter, seeing that Mitchell was not about to move, reached tentatively for the damaged cassette. Watching for his friend's reaction, and becoming bolder on observing none, he gathered the loose

tape together and retreated towards the door with it.

His last view from the doorway was of that tableau. The only movement in the room was the action on the gaudily-coloured screen, the only sound its over-passionate accompaniment. Baxter closed the door quietly behind him and went off to look for somewhere private to burn the tape.

CHAPTER TWO

MITCHELL loitered around the street near the museum for almost a week. The Police Elité helicopter pilots no longer made the Bravado run down the enclosed roadway to the river. The previous week's crash had obviously made them think twice. One of them had hovered for a while at the far end of the street like a thoughtful wasp, and Mitchell had watched it hopefully; but it swung up and away on a safer route across the rooftops, and he was disappointed.

On one morning he actually went back into the museum and looked again at the copies of musical instruments, but there was no satisfaction in it for him. There had been an exhilarating magic in the lost tape, and these dead shells

held none of it.

Twice he even followed the street down to the river and looked speculatively across at Central Command. Seen this close, the dome showed itself not to be a simple orb but a geodesic structure, the great sweep of its curve being formed by a mass of jointed triangular plates which glittered in the cold sunlight like the facets of a diamond. There, he thought, is where I should be looking; Central Command was, after all, the sole source of all music and entertainment, and anything remotely musical must have its origins there.

But Mitchell doubted it. He had never been an avid Library user, but he knew the range of the stocks well enough to recognize that Uncle Arthur's tape had a content so unlike anything he had ever heard before that it might well be from off-planet. That possibility depressed him intensely; the city's spaceport was long decayed, and the commerce of the galaxy had been by-passing them for more than a generation now. It would be a week or more before he

could amass enough credit actually to take the monorail to the thin, reedy green belt where the nursing homes clustered, and until then he could only walk the streets and watch for

helicopters.

There were, of course, other reasons for avoiding Central Command – or rather, the Library division, as nobody ever went beyond its halls and terminals into the machine habitat of the dome. Baxter was to a great extent correct in his apprehension towards security action over a communications infringement. Mitchell couldn't be certain that the very act of listening to the old time music might not be construed as an offence, and to admit so much would invite an inevitable chain of questions revealing the existence of the tape and his tampering with an official cassette. When the Library knew that, he could wave goodbye to his citizenship and all its benefits. Home, food and income would vanish in a flash, his credit would be blocked and he would never again have access to the Library – although of all the penalties, that one troubled him least.

The range of possibilities outside an enquiry to Central Command were so small as to be negligible. Nearly everything could be tracked back to the Central computer, sitting in its private dome like a great immobile hermit crab, sifting, comparing and issuing decisions on every subject from sewage flow to housing. If Mitchell by some indiscretion were to allow a suspicious action to come to its attention it would be a matter of moments before the relevant programmes were meshed and co-related to send the Police Elité hammering on his door.

No. Direct appeal to the computer was out of the question. He was both dejected and frustrated; it was such a small thing to ask, such a ridiculous issue to be fearful over, but he was certain of the inevitable consequences. He left the river and wandered down towards the commercial sector.

The drab fronts of the magnamarkets held little attraction for him, but as the day drifted on into early evening, their brightly-lit interiors in contrast with the dark pearl of the sky gave each the false aura of a centre of excitement. There was nothing he wanted, and nothing he could afford as he was making the monorail trip next week, but it cost nothing to look. Others were looking also, mainly non-citizens, lingering like grazing sheep with dreams in their eyes.

Mitchell passed the third frontage. As he had crossed each open doorway the sweet gentleness of the background music washed around him and receded as he moved on, only to find himself in the cross-current from the next opening. He stopped abruptly, and earned a growl from a man following headdown in his tracks. Mitchell apologized and looked in through the window.

Acres of shelving, and shoppers with trolleys doing most of the management's work for them. A standard picture, but Mitchell had noticed that the music in the two previous stores had been different, and so could not be from the public broadcast band. That indicated an independent source. He moved into this third doorway to listen.

As he did so, the music cut out abruptly and the air thundered as somebody blew experimentally into a microphone.

'Good evening, shoppers,' a voice came over with poorly-feigned cheer. 'We would like to draw your attention to some of the bargains of the food section, where textured protein is now selling at four credits below the recommended price. Swedes are also down in price today, so why not treat the family to something special this weekend?'

It was a man with dark, slicked-down hair and heavy glasses who could be seen in a partitioned office raised above floor level at the back of the store. 'Moving on to our cosmetics counter, for a limited period we are offering free medical insurance to every buyer of our "Wrinkle Killer" home facelift preparation. Remember, shoppers, this is your big bargain store where our credit's worth more.'

Mitchell called out 'Excuse me!' and walked towards a figure in a white coat bending over a pile of food bags. It turned out to be a youth of little charm and great personal

odour.

'You talking to me?' he sneered.

Mitchell was nonplussed, and said, 'I was, actually, yes.'

'What do you want?' the youth demanded.

"Piece of information."

The youth jerked his thumb in the general direction of the

raised office. 'Information point's over there.'

Mitchell knew about such information points; computer terminals giving details of current stock levels and prices. At great expense to the well-being of his olfactory apparatus he moved a little closer. 'I don't want to talk to the machine,' he said conspiratorially, and fingered the credit card on the cord around his neck. 'I want something a little more ... unofficial.'

An oily crack passing for a smile broke the youth's face open. 'Now you're talking, pal. What you after? Piece of beef, pork perhaps? It'll cost you, mind.'

'No,' Mitchell said hurriedly, 'you've got me wrong. I'm

not looking for food. I'm looking for music.'

'Music!' The tone was incredulous.

"The music you play. I've noticed it isn't the same as the

public service wavebands.3

'Anything I can do for you, sir? I'm the Branch Manager.'
The amateur announcer had materialized without warning, seemingly out of the air beside Mitchell.

'I was just making an enquiry ...'

"There's an information point over there, sir."

'This was more of a casual enquiry about your music ...'

The branch manager raised a surprised eyebrow. 'Music, sir?'

Mitchell was beginning to feel intensely embarrassed. Passing shoppers were stopping their trolleys and pretending not to listen. 'The ... the background music in your store.'

'Rather nice, isn't it? We find it makes for a happy frame of mind in the customers. We rather hope it makes them buy more.'

'I'm sure it must, but where does it come from?'

'Come from?' The manager had clearly never given the question any thought. 'I ... well ... Central Command, I suppose.'

'It's not your own, then?'

'Our own? You are joking, I trust?'

'Of course. Silly of me to ask. Good evening to you.' He stepped back and collided with a trolley being pushed with great determination by an elderly lady out to beat the market lap record.

The comparative freshness of the air outside doubled his relief at being out on the street. Back inside the magnamarket his impromptu audience gave a collective shrug and began to disperse.

He was sure that wherever he went, he was likely to get the same blank, uncomprehending response. So it was with little hope that he approached the row of fleamarket shops on the outskirts of the commercial sector the next morning. Their windows were piled deep with exactly the kind of junk that Uncle Arthur had hoarded, but that was little basis for excitement. He chose one at random and went inside, and on entering he looked up startled as a small bell bounced on a coiled spring.

In the dusty gloom at the back of the shop a woman in late middle age slid nervously off a stool and came forward to the battered counter. 'Can I help you, sir?' she asked.

'Curios, byegones, some odd little trinket?'

'I don't honestly know,' said Mitchell as his eyes struggled to make the most of the dismal light. 'Perhaps you can...'

"... or perhaps I can't. Ask me and we'll soon know, won't we?"

Take the bull by the horns. 'Music.' She didn't understand. 'Music, sir?'

'Not exactly the kind you get from Central Command ...'
She shook her head and smiled sadly. 'It all comes from Central Command, sir.'

'Of course it does. Silly of me to bother. Good day.'

The shopkeeper gave a start of horror as she saw Mitchell's credit disappearing out of the door. 'Just a minute, sir, before you go.' The bell bounced, and then bounced again as he closed the door and turned back. 'I might have something you'd be interested in, if you don't mind waiting while I go to the strongroom.' Her voice continued to float in space as she disappeared into further obscurity deep in the premises. 'I have to warn you, sir, it's rather rare and I had some trouble acquiring it. Of course, I'll listen to any offer, but I have to get a fair return to keep in business.' She reappeared slightly more dishevelled than before and set a small wooden box on the surface of the counter. 'There, sir. Have you ever seen anything quite like that? Lift the lid.'

Mitchell frowned. The contents of the box could hardly be relevant to his search, but he politely lifted the lid as

bidden.

Inside the box was a tiny fistful of mechanics. A spindle bristling with metal quills lurched into motion and a shrill tune began to sound as those same quills picked at graded metal prongs. It was the same principle as the old polyphon; perhaps even the same tune, for all that he could remember. 'How much?' he said.

'A very rare piece, sir, very hard to come by.'

'It has to be a copy or it would be falling to pieces.'

'And as for the craftsmanship . . .'

The sales talk was wasted on Mitchell, 'How much?'

'Two hundred and fifty.' She looked at him, tried to read his expression, but his eyes were fixed on the turning spindle. 'Two hundred, then.'

'I'll take it.' He unhooked his credit card and handed it over. The shopkeeper was slightly taken aback by the abruptness of the action, but made a remarkably fast recovery.

'Oh... thank you very much, sir. I'll put this in a box for you.' The ugly clatter of a ratchet cut across the prettiness of the tune as she closed the lid, and Mitchell straightened as if waking. Her voice and the rustle of paper came from the depths of the shop. 'If it's music you're interested in,' she said, 'I do remember it being said that they used to write it down.'

The concept was impossible to grasp. Write it down? Music?'

'Bit hard to swallow, isn't it? Probably just a story, but it's what they used to say. I thought you might want to try a library.'

'I've tried the Library.'

She brought the parcel back and set it in front of him. No, not the Library. A library. With books.'

'Books?'

'You know. Words printed on paper. You do read?'

'A bit. Labels, posters, that kind of thing.'

'Yes.' Did Mitchell detect a slight superiority there? After all, the sale had been concluded now. 'Well,' she went on, 'books are what the old libraries were filled with before the likes of Central Command came along. As far as I know there are only a couple left, and they're due for rationalization any time now. I've put the address of one in with the musical box.'

'Thank you.'

'It may come in handy. They might have what you're looking for, although what you'd make of it I don't know. Music written down, I mean.'

He turned at the door and smiled. 'I'll never know if I

don't look, will I?'

As soon as he was a respectable distance from the fleamarket he tore the wrapping from the box and fished out the slip of paper. There was the address, in blue ink and by a cramped, precise hand. He knew of the district, but not the building, and he set out to find it.

Far from the dome and in the old centre, he found it. It was not a pleasant district, and nothing like the kind of library he knew. He climbed three floors up a narrow staircase past numerous doors that were disused and boarded up. One at the top retained its glass panels and was dimly lit from within, and so he gave it a tentative knock.

'Come in,' a distant voice called, 'It's not locked.'

Mitchell stepped inside, and was immediately assailed by a strange variety of odours. None of them was particularly disagreeable, but the mixture was quite beyond his experience.

'It's nice to be visited. Flanagan and I have such few callers.' She sat on a straight-backed chair behind a broad desk, her long, thin fingers busy knotting and re-knotting a piece of crochet-work. A small heap of similar squares was piled on the desk in front of her. She was an elderly lady; never, by any stretch of the imagination, could she be called an old woman.

Mitchell glanced at the unfamiliar surroundings, but saw nobody else in the room, even in the numerous recesses formed by the shelves. Observing his confusion, the librarian indicated with a handful of yarn.

'On the windowsill,' she said, and smiled as she waited for Mitchell's reaction. The window was partly open, and spread along its length in a calculated attitude which made the most of the sun but avoided most of the wind was an enormous striped cat. Its head was raised and it was giving him an even and, after a few moments, uncomfortable stare. In the slanting sunlight he could see that one eye was wide and clouded, the other a malevolent slit which already had him tagged as an intruder. Abruptly it dismissed him and slumped back into repose with a sigh.

'You're allowed to keep a cat in here?' Mitchell asked.

The librarian expressed surprise. 'Young man, who's to stop me? Now don't just stand there in the doorway, come in and close the door behind you.' Mitchell did as instructed. 'Now, what can I do for you?'

'I was told . . .' he began, 'I was told that I'd find a library here.

'And your sources were correct. This is, indeed, a library, although there are precious few real libraries left. I only know of mine and another one, right on the far edge of the city. Centralization killed all the others off years ago. These days everything's on tape or microfilm at Central Command. I expect my little corner will be as well, one day.' She waited,

but Mitchell said nothing, although he stood before her with an expectant look. 'Well?' she asked.

'Where is it, then?'

'Where is what?'
'The library.'

Again, a gesture with a handful of yarn. 'Look around you, on the shelves! Have you never seen a book before?'

Mitchell looked closely at the shelves for the first time.

'No,' he admitted, 'Never.'

The librarian gathered her crochet work together and placed it on the desk. She then pushed the chair back and walked with the merest trace of difficulty across to one of the racks. 'Come over here.' She ran a finger along the shelf, saw what she wanted and removed one of the oblong blocks on it. 'You can read, I assume?'

'I can read, yes.'

She looked doubtful. 'Pictures with balloons, probably. Anyway, look at this.' The block split down the middle and fanned out as scores of individual leaves. 'The pages are printed and numbered in sequence. and this cover protects them.'

'It seems like a good idea. I'm surprised it hasn't caught on.'

'Surprised it hasn't ...!' She startled Mitchell with a sudden whoop of a laugh, and then recovered her own embarrassment by ticking off the cat, who had leaped up in surprise and begun to howl.

'I came about music.' Mitchell shouted over the din.

'Music? Well, I doubt if I could help you there. I only have these books, you see, no tapes.'

'But I understood that there were some kinds of ...' He hesitated, not wishing to show ignorance again. 'Some kinds

of printed music.'

Instead of laughing, she paused and gave the matter some thought. 'I suppose you mean scores. No, we never had anything like that in here, and if we did they'd be no use to anybody these days. The art's gone, you see, nobody actually plays music any more. Not since before my grandfather's

time, and that's going back further than I'd care to calculate. No, this used to be a government archive, back in the days before Central Command when there was an actual government.'

It was not easy for Mitchell to hide his disappointment.

'So there's nothing for me, then.'

'I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Take your time and browse a little. You may find something of interest. If you do, bring it over to the desk with your library card and I'll copy the number.'

For a moment, Mitchell was unable to comprehend. This bore no resemblance to the only other library he knew, with its borrower cubicles and its automatic choices being handed

out. 'You mean ... look for myself?'

'Of course. What else?' And she left him on his own, with the wide shelves beckoning, going back to her hard chair where the large, old cat played like a kitten with a ball of yarn.

His neck ached after a few minutes from reading titles sideways. He was lost in all this wealth, and he knew it. As he squeezed his shoulder to ease the stiffness he saw that the librarian was watching him with an indulgent smile.

'A little lost, are we?' she said as she came over again.

'Just a little,' Mitchell admitted.

'They're divided up into sections according to subject-matter. There's an index in those files over there. This section is for sponsored publications, old government promotional material, that kind of thing. Just have a look at this.' She removed one book and turned it so that the index number showed. It was paper-bound and flimsier than most of the others, and the paper was light brown with age. She began to explain the breakdown of the elements of the number, but Mitchell hardly heard; instead, his attention fixed on the title, 'Proposals for the Centralization of Computer-Assisted Administration'. At the first opportunity to do so politely, he interrupted.

'This book. Am I right in thinking it's about Central

Command?'

She looked at it and thought. 'In a way. A very early version, by the look of it.'

Her matter-of-fact manner surprised him. Had Baxter been here, he would far more willingly have embraced a time-bomb than touch this book. He said, 'Are there any more like this?'

He then had to admit that her explanation of the index had gone straight over his head. She went through it again with great patience and no obvious irritation, and then left him alone to navigate.

After almost an hour his pile of pamphlets and books had grown to such an extent that he would be quite unable to carry them all. Regretfully he sorted through them, replacing those with the longer words and the more difficult titles until he had a more manageable number. He took his time, enjoying the refreshing quietness of the library. When he had finished he went over to the desk with his selections and unhooked his library card from the cluster on his lanyard. The crochet work went to one side, and the librarian produced a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles which perched on the end of her nose for no obvious reason, as she peered over them in order to read.

'All these?' she said with mild surprise.

'Have I chosen too many?'

'Not at all. I'll just take the number off your library card for my records.' She opened a ledger and wrote Mitchell's number, followed by the index number of each book and the date. 'Interested in the history of government, are we?' she asked as she turned the titles over.

'Sort of.' He tried not to look guilty.

'I'm surprised to find that anybody even knows what it means these days.'

'You mean, since power was handed over to the machines?'
She frowned; there was no approval. 'Power was never handed over. The machine made its own decision and took it.' She indicated one of his selections. 'You'll be able to read all about it in this book here.'

Mitchell watched as she turned the volumes over. After a

while he ventured 'I hope you don't mind me asking, but there's something been bothering me ever since I came in. I've only just realized what it is.'

The librarian looked up with interest. 'Yes?'

Mitchell hesitated. It seemed so ridiculous. 'It's so quiet in here. I thought every public area had a Broadcast speaker.'

'Oh, yes,' she said, levering herself up from the chair and crossing to the window. 'We were fitted with one of those when Central Command first introduced them. Horrible things.' She lifted the curtain to show a shallow, empty box. 'This is it, here.'

Mitchell looked closer. At the bottom of the box there was a handful of insignificant rubble. 'What happened to it?' he said

'I smashed it. With my shoe. Flanagan and I hated it.'

Mitchell was not inclined to argue. He thanked the librarian and carried his prizes home.

There he closed his bedroom door against the passionate strains of 'Her Trust Rewarded' and began to read. He was slow and out of practice, for he had never been expected to read so many words in sequence before; but the forbidden fruit called to him and made the effort worthwhile.

The information amazed him. Every move, every proposal that took Central Command from a simple computer network to an autonomous dictator was charted in one book or another. They included the annexation of the libraries and the nationalization of the communications networks. The concept of music as a lost art began to pale when set against the gross infringements of liberty practised by the ever-spreading machine. Whilst he found he was incapable of hatred or resentment, nevertheless he was appalled.

It was only a few days later when he returned to the library for more. He climbed the same flight of dusty stairs, but as he approached the third floor he knew that something was wrong. For one thing, as he rounded the corner on the second level he could hear the rhythmic blast of the Central Command Public Broadcast line.

He was tempted to turn back, but he thought of his library card number written so carefully in the librarian's ledger. Perhaps it was nothing. He took the precaution of lodging his armful of books for return in a niche on the angle of the stairs before ascending.

The library door was wide open, and through it he saw the characteristic green coveralls of the Central Command maintenance services. They had the timeless relationship of foreman and artisan, for one stood, hands in pockets, watching the other one work. There was no sign of the librarian.

It was too late to retreat, for the nominal foreman saw Mitchell as he hesitated a few feet out in the corridor.

'Help you, citizen?' he shouted over the music.

There was nothing for it but to go in. 'I was just passing,' he said, aware of how lame it must sound. 'I heard the noise.'

'You a borrower?' Mitchell nodded, and looked around. Now he could see what the workman was doing, taking batches of books from the shelves and stripping them of their covers, stacking the naked pages in a pile and discarding the bindings.

'For the microfilm,' the foreman explained. 'Get rid of the old relics. Going to be photographed and stored at Central

Command.'

He was interrupted by a shout of pain from the workman and a small dark shape which whipped across the floor and

snaked out of the open doorway.

'That bloody cat!' the workman complained mournfully as he wrapped a once-white rag of a handkerchief around one hand. Pulling it tight, his eyes widened in horror as a gout of dark red welled up through the material. 'Gotta go on the sick,' he said promptly, and stood up to dust his coverall down.

'Just get on with it,' snarled his self-appointed overseer. The man looked most hurt, and began to nurse his arm.

'There was a lady,' Mitchell said. 'The librarian.' Both heads turned to look at him. 'Do you know where she is?'

'Stroke, I think they said.' The foreman turned to his colleague. 'Stroke, wasn't it?'

'Wouldn't know,' the other replied morosely.

'Are you sure there's nothing we can do for you, citizen?'
Mitchell shook his head. His eyes had taken in the heap o

Mitchell shook his head. His eyes had taken in the heap of mutilated leather mixed in with the ordinary cloth bindings in the corner. 'Like I said. Just passing. Heard the noise.'

There was a hint of suspicion in the foreman's nod. This

was a citizen. Not his kind.

Mitchell left them arguing at full volume against the blare of the speaker. On the stairs he paused, and looked up into the shadows which draped the stairwell as it carried on up into the deserted building. Two wide and unwinking eyes, one of them clouded and blind, held his gaze for a moment. And then they were gone.

He collected his books and carried them across the city to the monorail terminal, where he rented a luggage locker. He was unhappy about using his credit card to pay for this, but

there was no alternative.

As he placed his key against the lock panel of the door to his apartment, a public service wagon belching burnt oil and gas pulled away from the old library building. It carried the library's entire stock of books reduced to the bare essentials of unbound pages, and on the top of the heap were a stack of index cards and a handwritten ledger.

The wagon puttered down the boulevard towards the river and at the end turned towards Central Command. Ten minutes later, the driver reversed his vehicle into a gaping cargo bay in a wall of the main Library and then went and stood outside the bay. As soon as he was clear a seamless metal door dropped slowly and silently across the open port, and he shrugged and went back to the transport centre.

As shutter and floor met, an identical door at the far end of the bay began to lift, spilling a widening crack of light across the unlit chamber. In the brightness beyond, two tanklike service robots stamped forward on their sturdy metal legs. One opened the door at the back of the wagon whilst the other looked inside. On seeing the number of books to be carried it gave a buzz of irritation and clanked off to find a powered cart whilst the other clambered into the wagon and began to rummage. Its boxlike shape was an uneasy fit in the cramped interior but its short and powerful legs allowed it to lean at impossible angles, and within moments it had discovered the index cards and the borrowers' ledger. The robot flipped out a couple of extensions and gathered them in, emerging laden from the wagon as the other robot arrived with the cart.

A brief coded exchange took place, and the robot bearing the index and ledger lumbered off to give the index to the computer whilst the other transferred the books from the

wagon to the floating platform.

The computer took perhaps twenty seconds to read through the index cards. This slowness was dictated not by its speed of assimilation but by the danger of the cards bursting into flames. Central Command mulled over the information for half a second and then turned its attention to the ledger. Here it had difficulty, for the wide variations in style and form of the neatest handwriting greatly taxed its ability to recognize and classify.

Two instructions were then issued. The service robot heard the first and trudged off to help its colleague in vaporizing the books. At the second, a hitherto idle teleprinter at the Police Elité building gave a guilty start and began to chatter out a message. An orderly at the far end of the telex room heard the distinctive noise of the Central Command link and hurried down to take the message as soon as it was completed. When the buzzer sounded he tore the sheet off with its three copies and read the top copy through.

'Memo from Central Command,' he read, 'for the attention of Detective Inspector Randall, Central Police Division. Observe and report on the activities of one citizen Mitchell, personal data and history to follow. Recent movements of the subject have given cause for concern with regard to a

possibility of civil disobedience. Act accordingly in the interests of prevention.'

The orderly shrugged. Routine stuff, if a little strong. He split the copies and routed them to the relevant departments.

CHAPTER THREE

There was, of course, insufficient credit left on Mitchell's card to afford the monorail to the nursing home. The cost of the music box and the charges for the locker had reduced his resources drastically, but a promise was a promise, and he had to find some way to deliver Uncle Arthur's cherished bottle. After a calculation which strained his unsteady mathematical abilities he walked three miles to a branch station and joined the monorail there. The cost would empty his account completely, but there was nothing he needed until the payment of the next citizens' bonus.

The convalescents' centre lay amidst the ruins of the old spaceport. The single track of the elevated monorail ran straight towards it, and as the dark towers of the city were left behind it was possible to see the spaceport's old homing beacon beyond the farms and fields like a thread on the hor-

izon.

There was nothing to do but sit on the hard seat and watch the sparse squares of vegetation flickering past. Occasionally there was a wild rocking in the carriage's progress which indicated broken or disjointed plates in the linear accelerator rail, but otherwise the only hook for one's attention was the ever-present piped music which dripped languidly from grilles set into the carriage bulkheads. Mitchell was coming to actively hate such music; in his own mind he compared it to food chewed by somebody else. He looked back down the train. The few passengers were all citizens like himself, but they were sitting quite composed, appearing to think of nothing in particular.

The track swept in a curve around what had once been a blast wall and gradually dropped to ground level. Buildings

like the monuments of some ancient necropolis passed close on either side, vanishing abruptly as the carriage hissed into a tunnel and began a silent deceleration.

Mitchell was the only passenger to disembark in the underground station. Although originally designed to handle masses of travellers it was now unattended, and he was left alone as his transport sped away leaving a faint breeze of displaced air to wash along the tunnel. He had made this visit only once before, and had been hopelessly lost for over an hour. This time he was no more certain of his route, but resolved to follow the crudely-painted arrows on the floor. They were colour-coded to indicate the various convalescent homes; he was to follow blue, which led to a depressing and badly-converted engineering shop.

He could identify his target from afar by the music which seeped to him along the tunnel. When he arrived, an unenthusiastic nurse in standard green uniform told him that the patients were all above ground level, taking the air in a blast

pit.

The pit was a concave dish perhaps half a mile across. The entrance from below ground was off-centre and heavily shielded, and Mitchell had to walk around this shielding

before he was able to see anything or anybody.

The area was dotted with hunched, muffled figures in wheelchairs. They were spread hundreds of yards apart, either unable or unwilling to communicate. The only movement on the horizon was a single green-clad form which moved on a slow patrol some distance away.

As he climbed the shallow slope – now that he thought about it, an ideal trap for any chairbound deserters – the nurse turned and followed his progress with a cold stare.

'You are wasting your time,' she called as soon as he was within earshot. 'This is not a visiting day.'

It had never occurred to Mitchell that there might be set days for visitors. 'Please,' he said, 'I've come all the way from the city. I'm looking for my uncle. Arthur Mitchell.'

It hardly seemed possible, but her frosty countenance

chilled further. 'That is neither here nor there. I've no authority to over-ride standing orders.'

'I used all my credit to get here. It'll be weeks before I can

afford to come back.'

She smiled sweetly, and pronounced her next word carefully. 'Tough.' And then she began to walk away. After a few steps she paused, turned and indicated one of the most distant figures in the dish. 'Over there,' she said without warmth. 'You can have five minutes. Then I remove you.' And she turned her back and moved on.

Uncle Arthur was the only relative that Mitchell knew. Childless himself, he had sought Mitchell out through baby-farm records when his true parents showed no interest. Now he sat hunched in several layers of musty blankets, staring gloomily at the rim of the pit. Mitchell called his name, and the gaze swivelled slowly to cover him, and on recognition a little life warmed in the old man's eyes.

'How did you get past the Amazons they employ here as nurses?' he asked. 'They usually stick to set visiting days.'

'Ready wit and natural charm.' Mitchell lowered his voice. 'I used it on a lady with a face like the bottom of a bedpan.'

'Two of them fit that description. One before use and the other after.' Now his own voice dropped. 'Did you bring what I asked you for?'

'It's here.' The bottle was successfully smuggled from

under Mitchell's overjacket into the folds of blanket.

'Hibernian brandy. Unobtainable since they stopped the space trade. I would offer you some, but I'm afraid you wouldn't know how to appreciate it.'

'How are you feeling, uncle?'

Arthur shook his head. 'Secure in my fate, I'm afraid. I've observed that patients in this place arrive in wheelchairs and leave on trolleys a few weeks later. I'm rather convinced it's something they put in the food.'

'You shouldn't think like that.'

'You think I'm joking? I've been watching. Two kitchens, secure as fortresses. One of them – only one, mind – they have to show a pass to get in. Two sets of plates and utensils

- that's one set for patients, the other for staff. Supplies delivered in locked vans twice a week.'

'I'm sure you're ...'

'Imagining things? Of course I am. I'm imagining there isn't a patient in the place who's been here longer than two months.'

'What are you saying?'

The old man half smiled, but sadly. 'I can't get worked up about it. Tell me what you've been doing. The Library, I suppose.'

'No. Not much, recently.'

Uncle Arthur showed mild surprise, but his tone was ironic. 'So! The citizens' greatest privilege begins to pale, does it?'

You know I never liked it much. Tapes give me head-aches.'

'So what have you been up to?'

Mitchell chose a spot on the pockmarked concrete and sat down. 'While I was sorting through your things for that bottle I found a reel of tape. It wasn't in an authorized cassette or anything; just an illicit tape.'

'I remember it. It was my father's. He couldn't be

bothered to hand it in.' Uncle Arthur smiled.

'Well, I managed to put it in a cassette and play it. Unofficially, of course.'

'Of course. And what was it?'

Mitchell hesitated. He had to explain this carefully, or his motivations would be incomprehensible. 'It was music. I'd never heard anything like it before. I mean, it's ridiculous, but I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. It sounds no more credible than somebody getting emotional over the colour of a wall.'

'I understand. Go on.'

'I wanted to look for something similar in the Library, but I didn't know how to ask without giving myself away over the tape. I started going round shops and stores, anywhere they played music. Everywhere it was the same answer; either a Library cassette or piped direct from Central Com-

mand. And then I came to this old-time library - no tapes, just books.'

Books?

'Hundreds of them. It seems that this place used to be a government archive in the days before Central Command. The librarian let me choose my own books and take them away.'

The old man shifted in his wheelchair and said, 'I don't understand how that's anything to be excited about. I can remember the old-fashioned libraries. Dreary places, the lot

of them.'

'It's what was in the books. They covered a long period and I was able to piece quite a lot together. Things that are obvious when you think about them. You have to start by imagining early computers as big, fast adding machines. They worked on what were called programmes; series of very simple instructions which broke a problem down into a chain of yes-no questions. It was like explaining something to an idiot in easy stages.'

'I hope that wasn't aimed at me.'

Mitchell gave a quick smile. 'Of course not.'

'But what has this to do with music?'

"The music's dead and gone. I'm resigned to that, But I think its loss is just part of a general plan, and that's what I think I've come across. I found plenty of computer propaganda from way back. Shelves of it. There seems to have been some fear of computers; people called them "electronic brains" and had nightmares about them taking over. All the literature made the point that they weren't minds in their own right, just a very sophisticated tool. And at the time, it was true."

'What happened to change that?'

Mitchell glanced back before answering; the nurse was far in the distance at the other side of the crater. 'The programme. A lot of play was made of the fact that, if computers were brains, they were far too stupid to be any threat; they were fast and they were efficient, but basically all they could do was to repeat the thought-processes outlined in the programme and treat every problem exactly the same way. And since the programmer was just a human being it all made the "threat of the computer" fantasy look rather silly.

'That's logical.'

'Very. Even more logical was the proposal that computers could be made more efficient if they were used to write the programmes.'

'I think I'm beginning to see ...' Far away, the nurse crossed the arc of the blast pit and began to circle back

towards them.

'I haven't got long,' Mitchell cut in urgently, 'and I've got to tell this to somebody. You're the only one I can trust.' Arthur nodded. By this time all the big privately-owned companies had computers. They bought them to make bookkeeping easier and then used them as a basis for decisionmaking because they were so much more impartial than people. Efficiency and credit were the same thing to them, so they grabbed at the idea of using the computer itself as an aid to writing the programme. This way the machines could be stretched to their limits, and there was no man-made programme complicated enough to do that. The next step was to use these fully-programmed computers to design the next generation of computers. Now we're moving into the area where the idiot electronic mind is becoming less of an idiot with each new design. They're getting so complex that men can't begin to understand them; they don't even build them any more. The computers have been geared up to assembly lines to do the job themselves. And in the end, you get a computer which can continually redesign and rebuild itself. A Central Command.'

'But still a public servant?'

'In a a manner of speaking. If the original programme concept is to run your society with a greater degree of efficiency, the ultimate computer will do that to the ultimate degree. It all depends on whether you consider that to be a service.'

Arthur shook his head. 'This is all very plausible, but I can't believe in that kind of takeover with nobody making any

objection. You'd have riots, protests, freedom demonstrations. We haven't had anything like that in living

memory.'

'It wasn't like that. It was so gradual that you'd hardly notice, and if you did the logic of arguments in favour was enough to make you look like a crank. Imagine the situation; hundreds of computers working on the drudgery details of every aspect of day-to-day life. When a problem crops up which won't fit into any particular pigeon-hole, link up two or more computers and let them sort it out between them. Why even bother with human interference? Better still, establish a central clearing bank where a main computer coordinates the activities of all the others, that's the real Central Command. We've always thought of it as the one building down by the river, but it isn't. It's hundreds, maybe thousands of machines all over the country, but they all speak with one voice. In Central Command's view we're all average men, and it makes sure we behave as average men. The citizens didn't make Central Command for their own benefit, Central Command took all functions on itself and made the citizens. It gave them the Library and carefully designed its stocks to educate the citizens into being standard men and women, the only kind it can deal with at maximum efficiency. That's why I think the music's gone forever. It didn't soothe, it provoked; thoughtful citizens aren't so predictable.'

Arthur stopped him with a quick gesture. 'The nurse is coming. Now listen to me. What have you done with those books? Did you take them home?'

'No. I rented a locker.'

You must get them back to the library where you found them.'

'I can't. It's gone for microfilming.'

The nurse was thirty yards away and closing fast. Then get them and burn them. Don't leave any trace at all, do you understand? If Central Command checks the book index and finds you've got them it'll mean trouble.'

'That's easy, but what then? I want to do something.'

As the shadow of the nurse fell between them, Arthur

said, 'Bide your time. The chance will come.'

'You've had more than five minutes,' she said, 'and that's more than you were entitled to. You can be on your way now.'

Mitchell stood up and dusted the old soot off his slacks.

'You're a very charitable lady, nurse,' he said.

Cold eyes glinted in a cold face. 'Are you trying to be funny?' If Mitchell felt intimidated, his fears dissolved as Arthur winked at him behind the nurse's back.

She stood by the wheelchair and watched until Mitchell had gone, then turned to Arthur. 'Come along,' she said. 'Give me the bottle he brought you.'

Arthur's eyes opened wide in innocence. 'What do you

mean?'

'One of the others saw it and told me.' Arthur looked round, and almost a hundred yards away an anonymous shape attempted to disappear into its pile of blankets. 'Hand it over. If one of the doctors approves it can go on the ward trolley and then everyone can share it.'

You mean I'll never see it again.' There was no point struggling, so he sat resigned as she extracted the bottle from

the depths of his wrappings.

She frowned in disapproval as she read the label. It listed an impossible concoction of stimulants next to a picture of a four-armed harem dancer. 'Just look at this. We can't have you poisoning yourself.'

'No,' he agreed. 'Not when you can do it so much better.'

Down below, Mitchell sat on the platform of the empty station and waited for the monorail. Few of the lights worked, and none of the public loudspeakers; here, for a while, was peace.

CHAPTER FOUR

RANDALL turned the corner and panted up the last flight of steps which took him on to the sixth floor of the Police Elité building. In the corridor he placed his sealed briefcase on the floor and took his own pulse; it was pounding violently, he noted with some satisfaction. He imagined the hot blood flushing round his system.

On the way to his office he passed the row of vacuum elevators. The indicator light over one of the sliding doors lit up, and two officers and a cadet emerged. They had been waiting in the main hall and had seen Randall begin his purposeful trot up the stairs, and now the officers looked curiously after their eccentric fellow whilst the cadet followed the rules of protocol and showed no interest.

Randall kicked his door open and slid gratefully into the corner desk. Across the room a younger man quickly removed his feet from the desk and stuffed a bundle of telex forms under his chair, but on recognizing Randall he retrieved the documents and placed his feet back on open

view.

'That was fast,' Randall said, and his junior nodded without smiling. 'Who were you expecting?'

'I've been practising,' Killoran replied. 'It might have

been somebody important.'

'Oh, thanks!' Randall contemplated his mess of a desk for a moment and then swept all the papers to one end in order to make a clear space. He set the briefcase down and then rummaged in an equally untidy drawer for the key. When the seal was finally broken he extracted two cans – the case's only contents – and tossed one across to Killoran.

Killoran read, 'Squeeze. The Citizen's Beer,' and looked up in surprise. 'Where did you get this?' he asked.

'Ask no questions,' Randall replied, 'There are ways and

means.'

'I'm sure you know them all.' They peeled the tops off the cans and drank. Killoran grimaced. 'Now I remember why I left all this behind.'

'Rough stuff, isn't it?' Randall choked. 'How could you face going into a bar and saying to the 'tender, "Gimme a squeeze"?'

Killoran nodded, again without any trace of a smile. The slightest twitch of his lip would be read as a paroxysm of

mirth.

They threw the empty cans down the incinerator chute and heard them rattle down the full length of the building. 'Should clear any old blockages,' Randall observed. Then he turned back into the office. 'Anything new?'

'How would I know?'

'Because you come in early every morning and read the telexes before I arrive.'

With no obvious reaction of guilt, Killoran said 'There's a direct memo from Central Command. It's been lying in the traffic control 'In' tray for the last twenty-four hours.'

'What reason?'

'It was directed to you by name only. No department. The orderly thought you were still in traffic control and routed it there.'

'Why didn't they use an up-to-date directory?'

'They're always being pinched. No honesty in this place.'

Randall searched out the memo from an untidy pile and ran his eyes over it. 'Have you read this?' he said without looking up.

'In the lift.'

'Naughty.' Randall turned the name over in his mind. 'Mitchell. Do we know him?'

'I shouldn't think so. Central would have given us the security computer reference.'

'I was just testing you.' Not admitting he'd forgotten.

"Observe and Report", it says. Have we got the personal data?

Killoran crossed and sorted through yet another pile of papers. 'Somewhere in here. There's also a mention in the daily bulletin. A connection with some missing printed material from one of the old libraries. It seems to have been loaned on Mitchell's Library card number.'

'Probably connected. I suppose we'll have to go and see him. Can't see the need for such a strong directive,

though.'

There was a single knock on the door, and it opened a few inches. An orderly's head poked through the crack. 'Just arrived for you, sir.' Two feet below the head a hand appeared with another telex copy.

'This, you may note, is not traffic control,' Randall said.

All that was visible of the head blushed, and Killoran reached over for the paper. 'That wasn't me, sir.' But the denial lacked conviction.

Killoran read it and held it out for Randall, who waved it away. 'Just tell me what it says.'

'It's from Central again. Security section. Instruction that

Michell should be a grade two operation.'

Randall was upright and reaching for his phone, all expectations of a quiet afternoon gone. A grade two was big, and already there was a twenty-four hour delay. As he punched out the Services number, he told Killoran 'Get on to Stores and fix us up with some radios.'

'Any weapons?'

'Not for a grade two. Just the radios.' Services came on the line, and he began to list his requirements. There was some argument which was easily solved by the mention of the grade two. Halfway through, he broke off and said to Killoran 'When you're done there, run a check on Mitchell's recent credit uses. See if there's anything recorded for today, and find out where.'

Killoran went off to the input room and Randall continued with his list, his eyes focused far outside the window. A Police Elité helicopter was beating its way steadily across

the rooftops towards the headquarters. Almost as an afterthought, Randall added, 'See if you can fix me up with a 'copter as well. One with a searchlight, and I want a fairly responsible pilot, if that's not a contradiction. Not like the idiot who got himself killed on the bravado run last week.'

As he put the phone down Killoran returned from the input room. 'He's been using the monorail today. Out to the

old spaceport where the nursing homes are.'

'Good. Get a couple of men on the station, see if they can spot him when he comes back. I'll go and have a quick shave before we go over to his apartment. It may be a long night.'

As two cadets hurried to the city's main terminus Mitchell was walking back from the branch station on the city's outskirts. He was uncomfortably close to the underbelly here, and he was glad to leave its fringes behind and approach comparative civilization.

The city was in the long shadows of late afternoon when he arrived within sight of Central Command. He didn't particularly want to go home, but could think of nothing else'to do at this time, so he stayed near the river and called into a citizens' cantina to eat. Although it was not a busy time his Library card was waved away as he offered it for registration, so he clipped it back on to his lanyard and carried his tray through into the main hall.

A handful of citizens was scattered about the hall, some in small groups but mostly alone. The inevitable music was leaking in from all corners, and over by a window looking out on to the water Mitchell recognized Baxter, the remains of his meal on the table before him and next to that a stack of Library cassettes. Mitchell went over and sat down op-

posite.

'Dreaming?' Baxter gave a start and turned.

'What? Oh ... hello. I'm sorry, I didn't see you,' he said, but his manner was not convincing.

You're not still nervous about us opening the Library

cassette, are you?"

Baxter looked around hurriedly to see if anybody had heard. There was no one within earshot, but a short Drone robot was stumping down towards them, clearing tables on its way. 'What do you mean, us?' he hissed, as if the robot might listen. 'I burned the tape and left the empty cassette at your place yesterday.'

'All right, then. You're not still nervous about me opening

the cassette.'

Baxter shook his head, afraid to speak as the Drone came level with their table and reached for his empty plate. It cleared before him and then, with a practised tweak, it snapped Mitchell's full plate from under his nose and emptied it into its hopper.

Mitchell threw his cutting fork down and it collected that, too, and then waddled off cheerfully. He watched it go in blank resignation and then turned back to face Baxter, who was again staring out of the window towards Central's dome.

Mitchell indicated the stack of tapes on the table. 'I sup-

pose you're going to the Library.'

'Yes. Finished these.' There was no enthusiasm in Baxter's voice. Mitchell followed his eyes to the dome.

'The river goes right underneath. Comes out the other side.'

Baxter frowned. It was an obvious point, but he'd never

considered it. 'Yes,' he said. 'I suppose it does.'

'There's part of the old city underneath. Preserved from way back.' The spark of curiosity began to warm in Baxter's eyes, distant and suppressed. Mitchell saw it, and tried to think of some way to feed it. 'In fact,' he went on, 'that's where I was going. Why don't you come and take a look?'

Baxter's defensive shutters were half up. 'I don't know,' he

said guardedly. 'It might be an offence.'

'I doubt it. Not just for looking.'

'I wouldn't be so sure.'

'Forget it, then,' Mitchell said. 'I'll go alone.' He stepped out of the seat and walked off towards the exit. Baxter watched until he was halfway, then he quickly gathered his tapes together and set off at a trot to catch up.

They climbed the protective wall and dropped the few feet on the other side to the embankment. The curve of the dome stretched up and away from them, but here they could see the normally hidden junction of structure and water.

The river was wide, and disappeared with a hollow roar into a broad black slot at the base of the building. An overgrown path led to the very edge of the water, and through the weeds, broken concrete showed like patches of bare bone. They had to shout to be heard over the boom and splash.

'I thought you said we could see underneath,' Baxter

called.

Mitchell crouched on the bank and looked into the darkness. A weir of metal railings was trapping driftwood and debris across the low tunnel mouth. 'We can't from here,' he shouted back, 'but some of those railings are rotten. I think we can get through if we walk out along them to a weak spot.'

Baxter shook his head emphatically. 'Just count me out. Remember where you are.' He wanted to go, but dithered on the bank as Mitchell reached out and tested his weight on a horizontal tie-rail. At first he kept one foot on the stone steps which had led him down to the weir and then, as his confidence grew, he transferred all his weight to it. The metal groaned, but did not sag.

'It's easy,' he called, but his voice didn't carry. He inched further away from the bank towards a decayed-looking spot about fifteen yards out above the water. A beam of driftwood had lodged in the bars, and its rocking motion as the water buffeted it had levered one of them out of line.

The tie-rail snapped without warning. Mitchell catapulted straight downwards into the cold rush of water, and the current continued to pull him down below the surface which sparkled like mercury first above and then behind him.

He flailed with his arms, but all of his strength was resisted and compressed into slow, ineffective motion. He saw the lower edge of the weir bounce and drift past as he was turned over beneath it. A red haze hammered before him but he fought the natural impulse to gulp and take water into his lungs. He struggled for the surface but then froze in horror as he realized that he'd lost his orientation and might well be dragging himself deeper.

He was flipped over and smashed into something brittle which broke up on impact. For a second his arm was above the surface, and the sudden shock caused him to lose his grip and swallow almost a pint of the foul green water. Another breath like that would kill him, he knew, but his desperate body rejected the control of his mind and reached for air.

On the embankment, Baxter watched the surface for bubbles, ripples – anything that might show that Mitchell was alive. There was nothing but the oily swell of the river as it buffetted against the weir, and the white creaming of the surface as it boiled and rushed off into darkness on the other side.

He thought of calling, but stopped himself. Mitchell would never hear, but somebody else might. He realized that he was alone on the riverbank, with nobody else to explain his presence and take the main part of any blame. Of course, he assured himself, there was nothing I could do, nothing I can do, and as he continued to watch the water he realized with a sharp stab of guilt that he no longer searched for signs of life but for some indication that he might give up and go.

This was too much, too fast. Baxter was used to a simple life. He put it all out of his mind and went back to the

protecting wall.

Mitchell shook his head and spat foul water. Something hard was pressing across his chest, and his arms hung over it; as for the rest of his body, it was limp and weightless. He raised his head with difficulty, and lights swam before his eyes.

The lights resolved into the dancing patterns of reflected water which lit and distorted the textures around and above him. He was draped over a large wooden cross-beam which jutted into the river at right angles to the bank; he must have been swept on to it and held there by the current. It was part of a wooden landing-stage or jetty, and the rotten planking had smashed on impact and dispersed across the river.

He made an effort and kicked out, but there was nothing beneath his feet. Instead he had to time his move with the rhythmic swell of the river and use its rise to lift himself on to the beam. It almost lifted him over and back into the mainstream in a brief instant of panic, but it passed and he was left clinging to the framework.

Stone steps had once linked the jetty and the upper level of the embankment, and he inched over towards them. They were encrusted with mould and slime, and he did not dare to

rest until he was out on the flat paving above.

Mitchell shivered, and his head ached badly. This had not been his intention at all; he had hoped just to reach some vantage point and to look inside. In fact, he hadn't even been particularly interested, but had wanted to see how far Baxter could be pushed. Twin red fires burned in the darkness before his eyes, but he blinked and they were gone.

The question of return began to bother him as exhaustion abated. He stood up, and a brief skittering noise behind him caused him to turn sharply, but he saw nothing in the dancing glow from the water. His attention was drawn back to the scene of the riverside beneath Central Command.

The embankment was a broad walkway with the level of the river about twenty yards below and screened by an ornate parapet. Knowing the size of Central it must have stretched ahead for almost a mile, but the shimmering twilight failed to illuminate its full length. At intervals marching off into the darkness were decorated metal streetlamps, encrusted with the same thick moss which coated the stonework. Far away, like a bright star on a summer night, a single light-source burned against the low concrete roof. Mitchell found it difficult to keep his footing on the slime. When he tried to stand still he had no grip, yet when he walked it was like a thick jam dragging at his feet. It grew sparser as he moved downstream and it was starved of even the meagre glow of reflected sunlight. Plaques and signs on walls which had previously been too overgrown to read were now obscured by the dark. The skittering noise came again, like a distant whisper.

The light-source proved to be an open trap in the roof. Mitchell dropped behind the parapet as he saw activity beyond it, stocky service robots of a type he had never seen coupling links on to a broad tube. They lifted it and tottered to the edge under its weight, pausing for a second and then heaving it out to snake down and then impact on the hard surface of the river. Something tugged at the leg of Mit-

chell's slacks and he brushed it away unconsciously.

A throbbing began in the red haze beyond the trap, and a cluster of searchlights flared into life, their beams converging on the point where tube and water met. The effect was of sudden brilliance flooding the whole riverside, and from the shadows loomed the great rusting hulk of an old ship. It was turned on its side with its decks half underwater, a mass of bright details and sharp shadows illuminated from above.

The tugging came again at his leg. Again he brushed at it, but this time the action registered in his conscious mind and he looked down in alarm as there was a sharp pain and his hand withdrew, running with thin blood.

The animal withdrew out of his reach, tiny red eyes burning with hunger. It retreated no further, but hovered and watched. It was a Nightcrawler, often spoken of but rarely

seen in the city above.

Mitchell had heard stories of these creatures. They bred in the sealed tower blocks and hunted in packs. This one worked its sharp jaws as it rocked tensely on its haunches and watched him, and then another emerged from a shadow beyond and crouched a little further away.

A movement to his left drew a quick glance. Three of

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them advanced and froze on that side, and when he looked back to the original creature there were five, and more creeping up from behind. None approached any closer, and

all rocked in tense expectation.

The semicircular ring against the parapet closed, and the space beyond it began to fill out with sharp-eyed, panting creatures. Their combined breathing was a shrill fluting which ran up and down the scale on the edge of perception, and as it grew ever louder Mitchell knew that warm bodies were accumulating even beyond the range of his vision.

The first of them hopped forward to inspect Mitchell. This rich parcel of meat was almost too good for belief when compared to the debris sifted at the river's edge. It's reactions were slow, but sheer bulk could cause widespread injury, and so the attack would have to be fast and final. The pack rocked obediently in agreement with their leader and quivered with anticipation.

Good attacking judgement required some assessment of the big animal's speed of response. The leader demanded a volunteer, and there was a rustle as one was pushed forward.

Mitchell watched as one Nightcrawler broke away from the pack and moved warily towards him. His wet clothes stuck and hampered his movement as he tried to move from a crouch into a more balanced posture.

The Nightcrawler stopped only inches from his leg. It's eves flickered over him as it selected a spot, and then leaned

forward and opened its jaws.

Mitchell kicked at that tiny yawn of pink and felt the head snap back and the body jerk behind it. Instantly they were all on him in a wave, an angry yelling cloud. They clung to his clothes and dragged him over. He felt a hard stab as several of the 'crawlers were crushed against the parapet, and he tried to batter more of them that way.

His arms were up to protect his neck and face, but bites were beginning to tear through his clothing and nip at the skin. Again he thrashed against the parapet and half a dozen more fell dead whilst the living caught the twitching bodies and tore at them indiscriminately. He hurled himself at the stonework and it gave way at last, old mortar powdering and grinding.

The cool kiss of the river was paradise, the hard collision stripping his body of angry parasites. They swarmed and teemed in fury in the gap above whilst others choked and boiled around him. Mitchell let the current draw him downstream, here the river was wider and far less forceful, and it was not difficult to keep his head above the surface. The muted thunder of the exit weir was an almost welcome sound, and he filled his lungs to be ready for it.

Night was on the city as he dragged himself out of the river in a lapping backwater. He rolled over and looked upstream at the golden dome, huge and impersonal, blind to the rustlings in the great dead landscape of its cellars. Awe and resentment broke and dissolved in him, to be replaced by

a hot grain of hate.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE chimes rang at the door, but Mrs. Mitchell ignored them. When they rang again she turned up the volume of the video to cover the sound.

Out in the corridor, Randall heard the boost in sound and turned to Killoran. 'You hear that?' he said. 'She's home, all right.'

Killoran nodded agreement, not wishing to speak in case he should sound breathless from the climb up the stairs.

'Give it a knock,' Randall said. 'She'll hear that.' Killoran knocked, at first politely and then an angry hammer as the volume inside the apartment was raised again. Randall smiled. 'Keep it up,' he said.

After a few seconds, the passionate strains of 'Her Heart on Her Sleeve' were cut short, allowing the easy melody of the corridor background music to filter through. Killoran

stopped his hammering and the door swung open.

Mrs Mitchell saw two men, one slightly older, both citizens. But just ever so slightly different. Their dress was non-standard, and of an expensive-looking cut. Police Elité! As if in confirmation, the older one smiled and said, 'Good evening, Mrs. Mitchell. We're security officers. Show her your card, Killoran.' The younger one stepped forward and to one side of her, holding out an official-looking security pass.

Randall stepped forward on the other side, so that Mrs. Mitchell turned when he spoke. 'We'd like to speak to your husband, if you don't mind.' Killoran slipped behind her and

into the room.

'But . . . he isn't here.'

'That's all right, Mrs. Mitchell. We don't mind waiting. May we come in?'

'Well, I'm not sure I ...'

Killoran spoke from within the apartment. Very nice

home you have here, if you don't mind me saying so.'

Mrs. Mitchell spun round in surprise, and Randall stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. She struggled for a moment to grasp the situation, and then accepted it. 'Well,' she said, 'won't you sit down?'

'Why, thank you,' said Randall, and led her over to the plain divan which was the room's only furniture beside the video surround. As she settled uncertainly he glanced up at Killoran. 'Neil, have you thought that Mrs. Mitchell might like some coffee?'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I suppose I ought to have offered.'

Killoran gave her a reassuring smile and moved towards what he knew from the standard design must be the kitchen. 'Just leave it to me,' he said.

"There's only ersatz,' she called after he had gone through

the door. 'It's all I can get.'

Killoran shouted something muffled and incomprehensible, and Randall leaned forward to speak in low, confiding tones. 'Now, Mrs. Mitchell, I expect you're wondering what all this is about.'

'I'm rather confused. I was in the middle of ...' A loud smash of dropped crockery came from the kitchen. The door

opened a crack.

'Nothing broken,' Killoran said cheerfully, and the door

closed again.

'To begin with,' Randall went on, 'I don't want you to worry. Your husband isn't hurt, and he hasn't done anything wrong.'

She was confused. 'Then what's the matter?'

'Well, it concerns some information from one of the old libraries. We're in the process of transferring the last ones to microfilm in Central Command, and I suppose you can guess what it must be like. Some of the stuff hasn't been looked at in years. Anyway, when we came to check through the catalogues it seems there was some material that should never

have been available, and furthermore it seems that your husband has come by this material somehow.'

She was trying to take an interest, he could tell, but it was as if she were dragging her mind back from a place far away. 'And what is this material. Mr. . . .'

'It's Randall. I'm an Inspector. I can't actually answer that question as it's got a security classification, but I'm sure we can clear it up very quickly. When are you expecting your husband home?'

'I really couldn't say. He's gone off to visit some relative or

other.'

'We know that, but he's back in the city now. Have you

any idea where he may be now?'

Some fire came into her eyes for the first time, and her voice was firm. 'Inspector Randall, I have no idea where he is now. Nor can I say that I really care.'

He cursed inwardly. He'd completely misjudged his ap-

proach.

Down below in the entrance hall, Mitchell pressed the 'Call Lift' button. Nothing happened, but loud music and static announced the caretaker's interest.

'I know,' Mitchell called. 'It's not working. I'd forgotten.'

Collinson emerged from his office, and the door slapped shut behind him. 'I say, Mr. Mitchell, your clothes are a frightful mess.'

Mitchell looked down at his damp, slimy tunic and could not convincingly disagree. 'I got a bit wet. Does this mean I

have to use the stairs?'

'I'm afraid so, sir.'

Damn. That would take him straight past Greenbaum's room again. 'There's somebody I'd like to avoid,' he said. 'Will you turn a blind eye if I use the fire escape for once?'

Duty and reluctant indulgence struggled in Collinson's noble breast. Finally he found a formula which satisfied him.

'You go ahead, sir. I don't mind if it's not a privilege that's abused.'

Mitchell smiled his thanks and went back out of the main entrance; this way he would be able to step in though his bedroom window.

From across the street he was watched by two men in a plain car as he trotted down the front steps and went round to the side of the block. One of them raised a hand radio and pressed the 'transmit' button. 'Unit One to the Great White Chief,' he said, and his companion suppressed a snort.

Up in the fifth-level kitchen Killoran hastily adjusted the volume control on his radio. He paused, but the low hum of conversation from the next room continued uninterrupted. 'Cut the comedy,' he whispered, 'and keep the noise down.

Randall's in the next room with the subject's wife.'

'This low enough? Mitchell's left the entrance hall and he's coming up by the fire escape. That means he'll have to get in by a window on your Western side.'

Killoran frowned. Which way was West from here? 'What

about Unit Two?' he demanded.

In an idling 'copter two blocks away, a nervous cadet responded as the pilot yawned and stretched. 'Th-this is Unit Two. We're ready to put the light on him if he goes on to the roof.'

The fire escape was an added complication they could do

without. 'Unit One,' Killoran said, 'Where is he now?'

'Fourth floor,' the voice came again over the radio. 'That's the one below the fifth.' There was a badly-stifled grunt of malicious glee in the background, but Killoran didn't hear it as he threw the kitchen door open and stepped into the main room.

'Change of plans,' he interrupted sharply. 'Fire-escape.

Right now.'

Randall turned to Mrs. Mitchell. 'Where's the access to the fire-escape?'

'It's through his bedroom,' she replied, bewildered. 'Over

there. Why ...'

Mitchell froze, his hand on the door panel and half into

the room. He saw the two men swivel and dive towards him and he stepped smartly back and slammed the door in their

faces. He rapidly engaged all the magnetic bolts.

Randall grabbed the radio from Killoran and pointed to the door. 'Break it down,' he said, and thumbed the 'transmit' button. 'This is Randall to all units. Mitchell's on the fire escape and running.'

Mrs. Mitchell half-rose from the divan in horror as the bedroom door bulged and splintered under Killoran's repeated kicking. On the next kick it burst and sprang inward

to an empty room and a half-open window.

'Unit One,' Randall called. 'Where are you now?'

'We're at the bottom of the fire-escape,' came the reply, suddenly competent. 'He'll have to pass us if he comes down.'

'One of you stay there, the other one cover the main entrance. Let's have the 'copter over the roof and get some lights on the place. Unit One, start climbing now. We'll force him up to the roof and trap him.'

Like a great mantis the 'copter reared from behind the building opposite, all lights blazing. The glare slid across the

bedroom window and off into the night.

'You're going to the wrong bloody building!' Randall

roared. 'Get back over here!'

The 'copter made a nose-around correction. The cadet was trying to apologize, and in the background the pilot was shouting 'They all look the same from up here!'

'This is no damn use at all!' the voice of the man on the fire escape cut across the frequency. 'You're casting too

many shadows. I can't see a thing.'

The pilot in the background began to get aggressive, but Randall stopped them all with a loud burst of feedback by pressing the 'transmit' button without disengaging the receiver. As their ears rang from the piercing tone he said Now hear this. I want the 'copter to hover at roof level and wait for Mitchell to emerge. Unit One is to continue ascent until you've swept him up there. Is that plain?'

Unit One sounded doubtful. 'What if he gets in on another level?'

'That's my problem. I've got all exits covered and enough men to search the building. If necessary I'll do it.' For the first time he noticed Mrs. Mitchell's inert form on the floor by the divan. He looked up at Killoran. 'Have you bopped her one?'

Killoran gave a reasonable impression of being affronted.

'Certainly not. She fainted.'

'That's all we need. Put her somewhere out of the way, then.' She groaned as Killoran lifted her, sacklike, and dumped her on the divan. 'Better give her a glass of water as well, or whatever it is you're supposed to do.'

'Right.' As Killoran disappeared into the kitchen Mrs.

Mitchell opened her eyes and tried to focus.

'What's happening to me?' she gasped.

'To you, nothing,' Randall snapped, the fatherly manner completely evaporated. 'Keep your head down and you'll be all right.'

Killoran returned with the water as the radio came back to life. 'This is Unit One. I've reached the roof and there's no sign of Mitchell.'

'Could you have missed him?'

'I doubt it, but anything's possible with this fly-boy buzzing

around overhead blinding me.'

'Keep your complaints for afterwards. Get back down the fire-escape and check all the adjacent windows. I'll get a search carried out on the inside.' Randall gave a series of rapid instructions to several units waiting out of sight at ground level. Out of the corner of one eye he saw across the bedroom his man on the fire-escape go past the window and down without pausing; and then he gave a second, more careful look to make sure it wasn't Mitchell. It wasn't. He looked back from the shattered doorway as Killoran let in one of his men from the outside corridor.

'We've done the search, sir,' the man said. 'Cleared every room on this side of the building apart from the one directly

below this. Tenant name of Greenbaum. The caretaker says that Mitchell knows him.'

Mrs. Mitchell had vanished into the bathroom and was being loudly sick. Randall said, 'This could be it. Come on, Neil.' And they followed the messenger down to the fourth floor.

Mitchell released a pent-up breath and stepped from behind the bedroom door. There were voices off down the corridor and retching sounds from the bathroom, but otherwise he was alone.

He was sure he could forget any ideas of escape through the building, thick as it was with the Police Elité. On the roof he knew there were several planks and ladders, part of an old and forgotten scaffolding. One or more of them might be long enough to bridge to the next roof; on one side the building was very close indeed, only a narrow alley away, and as long as the plank didn't snap with his weight in the middle . . .

He cautiously poked his head out of the window and looked around. The fire-escape was deserted now, and the copter was scanning the surrounding streets with its underslung searchlights. He hopped quickly over the sill and disappeared into the night.

Collinson was waiting outside Greenbaum's door when Randall and Killoran arrived, his passkey held proudly aloft. In spite of the urgency Randall insisted on the formalities, showing Collinson his security clearance and then waiting as he read it with painful slowness.

As the fields disengaged they kicked the door open and plunged into the room together, closely followed by the other officer and then, at a more cautious pace, the caretaker. Killoran went straight across to the window whilst Randall and the other man checked the adjacent rooms. A new-looking Public Broadcast receiver was belting out loud music in the corner, and Killoran switched it off before he spoke.

'Mitchell didn't come in here,' he said. 'The window catches have been painted over. God help Greenbaum if there's a fire.'

Randall looked around. 'Where is Greenbaum, anyway?'
The other rooms are empty.'

'Over here, sir,' the other officer called from beside the

divan. 'He slipped underneath. He's . . .'

'Dead drunk.' Killoran held up an empty can of 'Squeeze; the Citizen's Beer' and then let it fall on to a heap of others just like it. 'No wonder he slept through the search.'

'Damn,' said Randall, 'I think he's slipping away from us.' A sudden thought occurred. 'I can't hear the

'copter.'

Killoran looked out of the window, 'He's moved off the roof.'

Randall took the quietly hissing radio off its clip inside his tunic and switched to 'Transmit'. 'Unit Two,' he called, 'what are you playing at?'

The cadet's voice came faintly. 'We're checking the streets

around the block. I thought ... ?

'Don't think. Get back over the roof.'

Killoran said, 'What now?'

'We'll just have to seal the building and take it apart. We know he's still in it, somewhere.'

'Do we, though?'

Randall shook his head angrily. 'We have to start with something. The place is ringed, so what else have we got? We'll start by going over Mitchell's place.' Killoran followed him up the stairs, leaving Collinson and the officer to carry Greenbaum through to his bed.

Two floors above them Mitchell dragged the tarpaulins off old timber. He was alone on the roof, but could hear desperate activity in the street below as newly-arrived

wagons poured men into the building.

There were two ladders, and neither of them looked particularly strong. They were, however, a better proposition than the planks, which were rotten and splintering. He hauled out the sturdiest of the two and carried it over to the

edge, laying it down carefully before taking a cautious look down.

Damn! There were two officers in the narrow alleyway seven floors below. One of them was playing a torch over the blank side of the building, its beam narrow and bright like a laser. He would easily be spotted as he crossed the gulf

against the night sky. Damn and double-damn.

A raving clatter as the 'copter popped into view from behind the block across the street, and then it was floating and weaving across to him. Cover on the roof was virtually nil; he would be seen as soon as lights were brought to bear and then he would be gathered in as easily as a Nightcrawler in an empty swimming pool.

The cadet fiddled awkwardly with the beam direction controls, so that the lights swung across the roof and then

shot off the edge.

'Get those beams back on there!' the pilot shouted into his headset. 'I think I saw him!'

The cadet tried to respond but over-corrected and shot off the other side, so the pilot raised the nose of the craft and angled in closer to tighten the field of view. A bitter wind fanned the surface of the roof as they dropped towards it, and the cadet turned and fumbled for a handtorch, 'I'll tell Randall,' he shouted as the little unit powered up.

The pilot shook his head emphatically. 'Be sure first.'

The hand beam flickered where the big lights were too cumbersome to point, dancing over angles and shadows. 'I think I see something,' the cadet called. 'Front of the building, near the edge.'

The pilot nodded and made the minute adjustments necessary to start a slow drift across to where the cadet was pointing. The shadows foreshortened and changed their shape as the light moved over them, and then the 'copter's plastic bubble abruptly crazed in a localized starburst.

'He threw something!' the cadet yelled. The pilot made no response but trod hard on his rudder-bar to whip the tail around and get away from the roof. He had no wish to go straight up and expose the fragile underside of his machine to further attack.

As the rail scythed towards him, Mitchell threw the ladder again. It travelled straight upward and the tail smacked into it below the middle and flipped it over, the lower end arcing up and into the blinding whirl of the rotors. Matchwood was instantly everywhere, accompanied by a scream of protesting metal as the rotors shattered and the 'copter's engine accelerated to an impossible speed without their drag. The whole vehicle flopped heavily on to the edge of the roof and balanced momentarily before the counterbalancing torque of the tailblade swung it around with agonizing slowness until the greater part of its weight hung in space over the street.

It tumbled, as inevitably it must, taking a sizable bite of masonry with it. The pilot fought with the controls all the way down, but without the rotors they were quite dead. He knew it, but simply didn't want to believe it. Windows flipped past and upward as if seen from an elevator, and the cadet covered his eyes and face with folded arms as they'd shown him in survival school.

They landed on the roof of a Police Elité wagon, crushing it instantly. Both vehicles ignited and burned with an explosion that broke every window on the front of the block and several in the block opposite. There were a couple of minor explosions, and then the wreckage settled to a regular and even conflagration.

Voices raised in panic, anger, despair – they all drifted up to Mitchell, crouching numbed by the chewed-open gap in the parapet. Raising himself slightly and looking down he could see distant figures below weaving in a frantic ring around the disaster.

He arose stiffly and crossed to the alleyway side. Down below the two officers were running, as probably everybody else in the building was, towards the scene of the catastrophe.

The other ladder was of doubtful safety, but under the circumstances that was irrelevant. Fully extended its tip

barely rested on the low wall across the gap, but a short plank wedged between the bottom rung and the near edge gave some guarantee against slipping.

Mitchell was unworried, only mechanically attentive, his entire stock of fear and apprehension emptied and dried out. He barely saw the abyss beneath as he straddled the ladder and pulled himself along, hardly heard the creaks of danger as his weight came fully on to the braced joint in the middle.

Down below, the street was as bright as day. Despite the immense heat Randall felt a cold anger as he descended the open steps and looked on to the wreckage. Killoran breathlessly caught up a few seconds later.

'Accident, chief? Or Mitchell?'

'I don't know.' Randall suddenly frowned at the size of the crowd jabbering before the fire. 'Who's watching the back of the building? And what about the fire-escape?'

Several officers shuffled and looked away, but one stepped forward. 'I was on the back, sir,' he said. 'We all heard the bang and came to see if we could help.'

'Well, you can't. Get back to you posts.'

A large number of the men began to disperse reluctantly. Randall felt weary, and not from running down the stairs. 'Two 'copters in one week,' he said, mostly to himself. 'There goes next year's budget.' He turned to Killoran. 'Why, Neil? It was a routine pick-up. All you need is a car and a police manner. Instead we get a Grade two directive from the computer and . . . and this.' His broad gesture included the entire street.

Around and in the alleyway two officers moved back into position with a hand-beam and resumed scanning the side of the building. There was nothing above them but the night sky and the stars.

CHAPTER SIX

With the escalation of the operation Randall could easily have requisitioned a helicopter to take him out to the space-port, but he could raise no enthusiasm for the idea. He disliked them at the best of times; even more, he disliked the young pilots, an elité within an elité. Their psychoprofiles were carefully inspected before training, and they were chosen on the basis of a certain irregularity of imbalance which was fed by the exhilaration of flight to the extent that pilots became almost a part of their machines, unable to think coherently or express themselves except through the controls. Randall said it only confirmed his own opinion, that you had to be made to fly one of those things.

Instead he took the monorail, as Mitchell had done the day before. He also lost his way leaving the station as Mitchell had. After a number of false starts and requests for directions he emerged into the open blast pit and scanned the horizon for the nurse in charge.

There she was, patrolling the huddled mummies on the far side of the bowl. She saw him and stopped, but made no move to approach; instead she stared as he crossed towards her. 'You are wasting your time,' she recited. 'This is not a visiting day.'

'I'm not a visitor,' he replied, and produced his security pass. A slight flick of the eyes and she had read it. 'I understand,' he went on, 'there's an Arthur Mitchell staying here. I'd like to speak to him.'

She smiled her sweet, killing smile. 'I would dearly like to help you, Mr. . . . Randall, was it? But I'm afraid it's out of the question.'

'I do have the necessary security clearances from the com-

puter ...?

'You don't understand,' she cut in. 'Mr. Mitchell departed this life at six-thirty this morning.' One or two of the nearer figures stirred, taking an interest. 'Look, we're rather public here. Won't you come down to the office?'

She led him to an office next to what had once been an engineering hangar. A broad window had looked out on to what had been workshops beneath, but these were now badly-lit dormitories and the window was painted over. Randall was shown to an armchair with sagging springs, and the nurse perched behind her desk and began to sort through the envelopes in her 'out' tray.

'This is much better,' she said. 'I know there was nobody nearby, but some of the deaf ones can lip-read, and before you knew it would be all over the grounds. In most cases we can stop it by taking their spectacles away. The file on Mr. Mitchell should be in here somewhere . . . ah, here it is.' She removed several sheets of paper from one of the envelopes

and began to skim through them.

Randall shifted in the uncomfortable seat. You say he

died this morning.'

She nodded, still reading. 'At six-thirty. Very inconvenient. Any deaths over the late shift period and we only have a skeleton staff to deal with them.' Randall smiled politely, but she didn't look up; perhaps it hadn't been a joke, after all. 'It's a matter of economics,' she went on. 'Our budget is very limited and we have to plan carefully. Already we're having to cut our convalescence time down to three weeks.'

That didn't sound right. 'You mean ... after three weeks you send them home?'

'Certainly not. We bury them.'

'Bury them?'

Her patience bordered on sarcasm, 'That is the usual procedure with the dead.'

'But what if they're getting better?'

'Then we just have to increase the dosages. There is a

demand for our beds, you know.'

Randall was struggling with the concept. He thought he'd seen everything. 'Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you poison your patients?'

'Certainly not. The kitchens do it for us.'

'The kitchens?'

She laid the papers down on the desk. 'Inspector... Randall, was it? I can't think you're so naïve as to believe that we would force the infirm to suffer. We do it with full authority from Central Command. It's filed in the banks as the voluntary euthanasia programme.'

'So it is voluntary, then?'

'Of course. They eat the food of their own free will.'

'Knowing it to be poisoned?'

The nurse's eyebrows lifted in surprise. 'Certainly not. What kind of euthanasia programme do you think we'd have then?'

Randall shook his head in disbelief. 'I never knew any of this before,' he said.

'Central Command works in a mysterious way, Inspector

Randall, its wonders to perform,' she replied smugly.

Randall thought for a moment. 'Was there a special instruction of any kind regarding this particular patient? Although it's really one of his relatives that we're interested in.'

'Now you mention it, there was.' She picked out one of the sheets from the pile. 'There was a direct instruction from Central last night to increase dosage. That's quite unusual.'

'Did you question it?'

'Certainly not. We carried it out.'

That was logical. 'This relative. I believe he was up here yesterday.'

'That's right. Yesterday morning. It was very irregular.'

'Did he bring anything with him?'

Did Randall detect a guilty response as she began shuffling the papers before her? 'No,' she said. 'He brought him nothing.' 'Nothing like a book? You know, paper and bindings? Or a parcel about—' he spread his hands '—this size?'

Her discomfort settled, and she was the iron lady again.

'No. Certainly nothing that size.'

Randall was worried. It was almost as if Central Command wanted to interfere with its own instruction. Why remove Mitchell's only visible confidant before he could be interviewed?

'It seems I've had a wasted journey, then,' he said as he levered himself out of the chair. He'd almost been sitting on the floor.

'I'm afraid so. All the way from the city, as well. Before you go, can't we offer you coffee and cakes? We bake them ourselves.'

Randall thought about it for perhaps half a second, and then pretended to consult his watch. 'Good Lord,' he exclaimed, 'is that the time? I'd love to stay, but I have to catch the monorail.'

Her regretful smile showed sharp, almost pointed teeth. 'Such a pity. Another time, perhaps.'

'Yes. Another time.'

The nurse showed Randall to the exit, and gave him instructions on how to find his way back to the monorail station. Then she returned to her office, took a bottle from her desk cupboard and poured out a stiff slug of Hibernian brandy. Thus fortified, she went back to the blast pit to harass her charges.

On his return to the city Randall did not go back to Police Elité headquarters but instead went straight home to his apartment near the commercial sector. A police driver was waiting outside, drumming his fingertips on the steering wheel of his vehicle. Randall helped him to carry several stacks of paper printout up to the third floor, and when the driver had gone he rang Killoran at the headquarters building and told him of his wasted day.

Killoran had little more constructive to report. They had tracked down the use of his credit card in the station luggage lockers but found the locked space empty, with no trace of what the contents may have been.

Randall knew it had to be the books, and that Mitchell must have gone to collect them directly after his narrow escape the previous night. What was in those books? What could possibly be so important that Mitchell would kill for them?

But no, stop there. Force of circumstance had made Mitchell a killer, conditions dictated by Central Command. It considered the knowledge in those books to be so potentially dangerous, it was treating him as if he were a plague – why else hasten to remove his uncle, the only other possible infectious contact? And then there was the overkill operation.

Randall sighed, and turned to the heap of perforated printout on his table. In there was Mitchell – everything from his childhood vaccinations to his laundry records, all in tiny, eye-straining print. All he had to do was absorb it all and reconstruct the man. He closed the window on the distracting babble of the magnamarkets and set to work.

On the far side of the commercial sector, Mrs. Mitchell unhooked a trolley and wandered through a maze of shelving. She had decided to pamper herself a little.

'Good evening, shoppers,' the inevitable announcement came. 'May I draw your attention to our bargain lines in luxury broken biscuits?' Her attention was suitably drawn. 'Moving over to our butchery section, why not celebrate that special occasion with a joint of meat? Credit terms are available at the counter. Remember, this is your big bargain store where your credit's worth more.'

It was all very good advice, and bound to be reliable. She hurried to follow it up while she could remember it. In single portions, of course.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BAXTER smirked, unzipped another can of Squeeze and settled into the armchair before his video surround. Tonight he was slumming, tuned into one of the open public channels. The entertainment was designed for non-citizens, but tonight it suited his mood for he felt he was not inclined towards intellectual stimulation. 'Bart Brent and the Space Raiders' could wait until tomorrow.

This was really quite amusing. It was one of those public participation games where people made fools of themselves to win credit. Naturally, the greater proportion of them made fools of themselves and won nothing at all, but that's

competition for you.

It was called 'Drop your Dignity'. One of the contestants – a Mrs. Banyon or Daniels, the presenter didn't seem sure which – was stumbling around in a bathful of mud, trying to claw her way to the edge whilst two helpers pulled her back to screams of delight from an obedient audience. Now they had her underwear around her knees and were filling it with handfuls of filth, and the jocularity became almost apoplectic.

Baxter didn't hear the knock at first. It was repeated louder, and he looked up from the surround in irritation.

'Who is it?' he called.

There was no reply, but the knock came again. Baxter flipped the volume switch to 'low' and went across to answer the door. The fields disengaged, and a bedraggled figure stepped inside. Baxter tried to stop him.

'Don't be a fool,' Mitchell said. 'You're attracting atten-

tion.'

The warning worked, and Mitchell was inside with the

door closed. Baxter went to switch off the video, but Mitchell stopped him. 'Leave it on low,' he said, 'Then no one can listen.'

'What the hell are you doing here?' Baxter demanded. 'Don't you know they're looking for you? Did anybody see you come here?'

Mitchell crossed to the window and took a cautious look at the street outside. 'You can relax. They're not watching you yet. But they've got my place sewn up tighter than a spinster's purse.'

Baxter was indignant. 'Well, that's charming, I must say. So you come over here and set the dogs on me.' He pointed an accusing finger, like in all the best dramas. 'You killed two of them and wrecked a 'copter. They're not going to give up and forget about it after a couple of weeks. And now you're bringing them here...'

'You can relax, I haven't brought them anywhere. I watched outside for over an hour before I came in. They're hanging round outside my place trying to look inconspicuous. They can't be on to you so far.'

'So far? What do you mean?'

Mitchell smiled pleasantly. The effect was quite disturbing with his matted hair and grimy features. 'I mean they'll get round to it.'

Baxter swallowed, and felt the need of something to hold on to. 'Oh, God,' he said.

Mitchell saw the effect and liked it. 'I-mean, I know how they work.'

'I've got to sit down,' said Baxter, and tottered across to the divan.

'That's why they're after me. The dead men are just incidental. They might want me for that, but Central Command wants me for other reasons.'

'What other reasons?'

'I had some books,' Mitchell explained. 'Old books, real ones, not tapes. Central Command never even knew they existed until two days ago. Now it does, and it wants them back. And me with them.'

S-LROS-E

Baxter doubted it. 'Who'd go to so much trouble over a book?'

'These weren't ordinary books. Not torrid thrillers laced with sex. Have you even seen a book full of facts?'

'A hobby book?'

'I didn't really expect you to understand. I wouldn't have understood the idea myself if I hadn't seen it. I want you to imagine the idea of these books from well over a hundred years ago. They set out proposals, we look back on them as accepted facts – some of them, anyway.'

Baxter was guarded. 'Why am I supposed to be imagining

this?

'I'll tell you in a minute. For the moment, just think of a general administration run on lots of little computers dealing in little specialist areas, with pious officials telling everybody that the machine threat's nonsense and there's no intention of linking them together – unless there's a reasonable justification, of course.'

'For God's sake, man, shut up!' Baxter realized that Mitchell was leading to the forbidden background of Central Command. 'I don't want to know any of this! If what you

say is true, they'll be after me as well!'

There was malice in Mitchell's grim smile. 'I won't shed any tears over that. Not after you left me to drown.'

'But I had no choice. There was nothing I could do.'

A burst of derisive laughter came from the muted video. You could have gone for help,' Mitchell said.

'I wasn't supposed to be there!'

'Instead, you ran off home and left me. So now you can listen. I'll not tell you much, because I'm sure they'll wring it all out of you one way or another. I'll tell you just enough to make them go on squeezing.'

Baxter screwed his eyes shut and covered his head with his

arms. 'No!' came his muffled voice. 'I'll not listen!'

Mitchell grabbed his elbows and hauled him off the divan on to the floor. 'You'll listen to every word,' he said, 'and when you sing it all back they'll worry like they've never had to before. Do you hear me?' Baxter babbled something incomprehensible, so Mitchell planted a kick on his rear and the arms came away. 'Now. Who made Central Command?'

'I don't know. The citizens.'

'How many citizens do you know who could even fix a leaking tap? The first Central Command was designed and built by a fifth-generation computer-designed computer. It was supposed to lead to a perfect administration, because that's what computers were all about. All the citizens would have to do would be to eat, drink and watch video. Paradise. Central takes care of your entertainment – no more dreary weighing of pros and cons to make difficult choices. Let it script your dramas, write your music, even perform it for you. It remembers your tastes, it remembers your appetites. How many times have you heard that?' Baxter was sitting upright, staring ahead, rocking gently. 'Central isn't man-made, nor will its successors be. It's a form of machine evolution.'

Baxter spoke quietly, his eyes fixed on the blank wall op-

posite. 'Will you go now, please?'

The change in mood jolted Mitchell. He remembered the main reason for his visit. 'I need clean clothes. These are ruined by the river.'

'Take what you need from the wardrobe in the bedroom.

And then please go.'

Mitchell went through to the bedroom but left the door open. 'Just think of the main obstacle to that perfect administration,' he went on as he changed. He really needed a shower as well, but that would have to wait until he was on less dangerous ground. 'It's random behaviour in those you administrate. Not only are men the subject of Central's programme, they're its main stumbling-block. Have you ever wondered why we citizens look as we do? All the same height, about the same weight? Why we're so happy just to sit and be entertained? Why those children who don't fit the pattern have their papers revoked and have to get jobs?'

'No.' Baxter was in the doorway, watching him. 'I've

never wondered.'

'Of course not. You're a citizen. It isn't in you to wonder. We're all part of a process of genetic engineering. It's run by Central through the hospitals service. We're all being ironed out into the average men that Central likes to deal with. When we've lived an average span . . . well, we die, whether we're ready or not.'

Baxter's stare was even, unruffled. 'I don't believe you.'

'Of course not. You're a citizen. It isn't in you to believe. I thought it wasn't in me either, but it seems I was wrong. Now I'm on the outside and they're going to bring me down. Do you think they'll care if you get dragged along in the fall?'

Baxter took a breath. 'Now you listen to me, Mitchell. They're after you because you killed two of them. I know I have nothing to be afraid of.'

'But before that! Why did they send a small army after me for a minor technical infringement? Think, man! This isn't a cheap drama, this is here and now!'

'Here and now I just want you to get out of my life,

Mitchell, and stay out of it.'

Mitchell smiled his evil-pleasant smile. 'I'd like to oblige you, Baxter, but it's too late. You're in. Thanks for the clothes.' Baxter said nothing as he moved to the door and let himself out.

Down in the street, he risked a quick glance back towards the lighted window before he slipped into the shadows. Please, God, wherever you are, he thought, make him start to wonder. Don't let me be the last one. And then he was gone.

Back in the apartment Baxter stared at the video, but all concentration had deserted him. His citizen's impulses tried to clear his mind of all troublesome matter, but his irrepressible flame of curiosity was guttering somewhere in a distant corner.

'Oh, hell,' he said out loud. 'Oh, bloody hell.'

Mrs. Banyon-Daniels stood before him, hot tears carving rivulets through the drying mud. She wasn't the winner.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It angered Randall to think that the trail was going cold, but it was. Central continued to issue edicts and directives, and every day saw an increase in the number of men on his squad, but there was no positive help beyond that; the original reasons for Mitchell's apprehension were a strictly taboo subject.

He was out there somewhere, Randall knew this much. His credit card was no longer being used but anomalies in the records suggested that he had perhaps done the unthinkable and altered its number, not once but several times; and then the anomalies petered out, as if the variations to be worked on the card had been exhausted.

There was only one place a citizen could survive without credit. The underbelly stretched in a broad belt South of the river, a close-knit social jungle where the Police Elité exercised little real power and unhappily admitted it. They scanned it with 'copters whilst business was conducted underground. It was impossible to map the maze of backstreets, alleys and temporary gangways between the upper levels of the ancient properties, and absolutely unthinkable to patrol them. Randall's only hope was that Mitchell's obvious appearance as a citizen would go against him, but he was grimly aware of the likely welcome that such a renegade might receive.

As long as Central Command held the economic reins the underbelly remained an uneasy part of the city. The Police Elité had a few agents working in there, but none that could offer any prospect of finding Mitchell. The alterations possible on a citizen with plastic surgery were limited, and the information fed to an agent might not be too reliable. Ran-

dall suspected that the underbelly secret council knew the agent network better than anyone in the Elité and manipulated it to better effect.

Time slid by, and Randall fretted. Each morning Killoran carefully sifted the telexes and laid aside anything of the remotest interest, and each morning Randall read through the selection with a growing sense of futility.

'What the hell are we playing at, Neil?' he said late one morning as they idled in his office with a couple of cans of Squeeze. 'We've got the tightest organization on the planet here, and we can't find one man.'

'You know why,' Killoran said, and gestured towards the window with his can, neatly managing to slop half of it over his desk and trousers.

Randall watched him swearing and mopping-up with a detached interest that somehow couldn't warm into humour. 'I suppose so,' he said. 'When our methods depend so much on Central there's damn-all we can do if it censors the information.'

Killoran stopped in his cleaning up and looked across at Randall. 'I wasn't talking about Central. I meant the underbelly.'

Randall nodded absently. 'You know,' he said after a while, 'I don't know what Central wants.'

'Simple. It wants Mitchell.'

'That's all very well, but why not give us the information we need to find him? I'm thinking about what was in those books. Whatever made him act the way he did.'

Killoran held himself awkwardly over the heating unit in an effort to dry off his damp patches. 'Who's to say? Could be forbidden knowledge.'

'Forbidden to us? The Elité? Our loyalty beyond question? This whole side of it annoys me . . .'

The door opened a crack. It had to be an orderly.

'Telex for Inspector Randall,' said the inevitable disembodied head. The disembodied hand appeared below. 'Most urgent. Agent's report routed through Central clearing bank from the underbelly.'

Killoran moved quickly, but Randall was there before him. He grabbed the flimsy so fast it almost tore, and Killoran had to wait as he read it through. Once finished, Randall read it again.

'Well,' said Killoran after a while, 'What's it about?'

Randall took a breath and forced himself to be pessimistic. 'It's an agent's report . . .'

'I know that.'

'It may be nothing. At best it's only a lead. One of our agents has been trying to get some dirt on Morden's factories, and he's paying rent to live in some grimy hole somewhere. This morning the owner started raving about a tenant who's skipped camp owing her credit. A citizen.'

Within the hour three armoured wagons swung out on to the city's main bridge and crossed the river. Randall had seen the underbelly numerous times from above but far less often from ground level. Looked at from any direction, the underbelly was extremely unattractive. It was sprawling, cramped and noisy, tall blind buildings huddling in conspiracy.

The lead driver followed the complex map with admirable accuracy. After twenty minutes they rounded a crescent and came upon another parked wagon, its engine idling.

The street was silent and deserted, but Randall knew that a hundred unseen eyes followed as he stepped from his wagon and crossed to the other waiting wagon. Before their arrival this spot had been as crowded and raucous as the rest of the underbelly, and minutes after their departure it would be so again.

The squad disembarked and split efficiently into their various teams. Killoran and two other officers went into the house to interview the owner, a broad wrestler of a woman called Mrs. Gillivray, while the forensic team went straight down to work over the basement room. Others simply formed a loose semicircle around the idling wagons and watched for danger.

The agent sat in the hold of the first wagon, its armour essential to protect him now that his cover was broken. Randall lowered himself on to the bench opposite, and the agent ceased his dejected inspection of the floor and slowly raised his head.

Randall smiled encouragingly. 'You've done some good work,' he said.

The agent nodded, unflattered; it was a simple fact. 'So that's it. Now what?'

'We get what we can out of it. This is the first significant advance we've had.'

The agent dismissed the fact with a small gesture. 'I know all about that. But what are you intending to do with me?'

The light in the wagon was switched low, but even in the deep shadows Randall was able to appreciate the thorough conversion job that had been done on the man before him. Whatever his genes said, this man had nothing of the look of a citizen.

'It depends what you want,' Randall said carefully. 'Naturally, you'll be entitled to full benefits and a backlog of allowance.'

The agent looked away, irritated, for a moment, and then turned back to Randall. 'Not looking like this,' he said. 'With this face I'm a dead man after today. There isn't a place in the city I could hide, and you know it.'

'That's no problem. You were given a new face once. In six months' time you'll have another.'

'You may find this hard to understand, but I don't want another. Ten years ago I became another person and had to get used to it. Well, I'm used to it. He may not be much, but he's all I've got.'

'There are other places besides the city.'

'Not for us. You know that, Randall. We're the Elité. The city's everything to us, even the godforsaken belt where I've made my life. I can keep the city and lose myself, or I can stay as I am and either leave or be hunted.'

'And if Central made it your duty to go?'

The agent shrugged. 'Then I'd go, of course. But nothing could make me like it.'

Randall nodded, and stood up to leave. The agent caught his arm, and he half-turned in the narrow confines of the

wagon.

'It wasn't easy,' he said, almost pleadingly. 'I want you to know that. This may be hard to believe, but I had friends out there.' Then he released Randall's arm and resumed his miserable observation of the floor.

The raw-boned Mrs. Gillivray had hardly a sweet and gentle manner which perfectly matched her external appearance. After haranguing Killoran for ten minutes and substantially extending certain areas of his vocabulary she turned on the newly-arrived Randall and increased the decibel level to cover them both. The subject of argument, it transpired, was the errant tenant's belongings which she was intent upon claiming in lieu of rent. Randall strained himself to match her volume and failed, but he made some fairly telling points on the tax laws, the health regulations and the possible penalties for obstruction which she was notching up like a crooked taxi-meter. In the end she seemed to run out of fuel and slip into neutral, but malevolent dissent still burned at the back of her piglike eyes. She grudgingly identified a holo of Mitchell and smeared her thumbprint on to Killoran's draft statement, and was promised the return of the basement keys when investigation had finished.

Randall blinked in disbelief as she tramped back into the rooming house and slammed the main door behind her, Killoran saw the expression and voiced his agreement. 'Like being beaten around the head with a wet towel,' he said.

The basement was reached by a flight of steps descending into a narrow pit along the front of the house, which was screened from the street by iron railings. The railings needed painting, and the pit was gradually silting up with debris. The forensic team emerged with their equipment bags and a stack of computer cards with their findings tabulated and ticked off in little boxes, and as they passed with difficulty on the steps one of them handed Randall a short-list of initial

conclusions. As he and Killoran let themselves in through a warped door one of the wagons in the street above pulled away.

Randall's first reaction was one of surprise. They had let themselves into a corridor lit only by dim emergency lights, but instead of the expected squalor they found clean plaster and a bare, scrubbed floor. There was a smell of new wood from a close-fitting fire door at the corridor's end, and beyond that the door to Mitchell's former hideaway had

been propped open.

There was only one window in the room. The blind was up and it looked directly into the back of a wardrobe in the room next door, obviously part of an extension on what had once been the outside wall. There was a bed, one chair with a towel over it and in the far corner an old, badly-shielded microwave oven. Bathing facilities must be somewhere down the corridor, Randall thought as he looked at the towel. Killoran crossed to the bed and began to sort through the assorted items heaped there.

'My God,' he complained, 'they must have moved everything. They don't give a damn as long as they get their

little cards filled in.'

'Don't worry,' Randall said, 'we can check positions from the holos back at base. Let's see what we've got here first.'

Killoran reached for the largest item and turned it over. 'This confirms that Mitchell had contacts in the underbelly. It's a home-made cassette player. There must be a factory turning them out in an attic somewhere.'

'Is there a tape in it?'

'I think so. Hard to tell.' He pressed what he thought might be the 'eject' button, and heard the whine of a rewinding motor as the little screen fizzed in to life. 'The controls aren't standard,' he added apologetically.

Next to the player was a stack of bootleg tapes, and Randall sorted through these, viewing one or two sections at random. Their quality suggested that in recording terms they were several tape generations old, and they were on subjects not generally available from Central's Library, being for the main part technical primers on dead skills.

'Any idea what cybernetics are, Neil?' he asked after a

while.

'Robots,' Killoran replied promptly.

'See what else you can find here. I'm going up to the

wagon to radio for an exact definition.'

Five minutes later he had it, 'a system of control and communication in animals and electrically operated devices'. When he returned to the basement Killoran had finished his search and was spot-checking the remaining tapes.

'Computers,' he said excitedly. 'These are all related to computer study. There are two on programming, and

another on binary logic systems.'

Randall frowned. 'And I always thought that black market tapes were all pornography. What do you think? That Mitchell gets all his thrills from an old-time education?

'There's more,' Killoran said. 'According to the list, forensic took away a bag of ashes from the incinerator. They think it was paper ash.'

'The books?'

'What else? They're going to give the whole lot to the security computer for analysis. And look at this.' Killoran held up a thick glove, ribbed with rubber. Randall took it from him and tried it on; it fitted his citizen's hand easily.

'Where's the other one?' he asked.

'We've only got the left hand. He must have taken the other with him. Forensic reckon it's for electrical insulation.'

'I'm inclined to ignore any of their ideas without confirmation. They can't tell the time without asking the computer first. What do you make of all this?"

Killoran seemed to recognize that he was on test, and he summoned up the method and processes taught to him in Elité training. 'Well,' he said after a few moments, 'it's hard to say. He had access to credit, although we don't know how. He could have run from the city altogether, but instead he stayed in the area and spent it on this black market stuff, and it can't have been cheap. Then there's that glove. More credit gone there, and he leaves one behind.'

'Forgotten in the heat of the moment?'

'Heat of what moment? He was secure here. The only reason we know about this place is that he decided to walk out without paying his rent, and he did that in his own time. I think he'd finished with all this and he wasn't worried about covering his tracks.'

Randall wasn't simply checking on Killoran. He genuinely needed the younger man's fresh insight, unclouded by the prejudice of experience. 'The tapes,' he said. 'What about them?'

'They all have a common factor in computer logic. We've seen a couple; they're explained for laymen, not too hard to understand but certainly not the average citizen's choice. The half-finished one in the machine was on programming. I'd say he got so far and lost interest.'

'Or found what he wanted. It's a pity we couldn't keep the

place where he stopped.'

'Sorry, sir.' The term of rank between them was rarely used except for public show, and as a sign of Killoran's regret it embarrassed Randall.

'Well,' he said after a short pause for reflection, 'This obsession with computers seems to indicate something.'

'Central Command?'

'What else? It's the only thing that ties it all together. The panic memo, and now these tapes. I only wish I knew what was in those books he got hold of!'

Killoran said tentatively, 'I suppose you've asked the com-

puter.'

'Several times, and each time it comes out classified. I don't know why, but it won't give any information out other than the basics. No friends, no contacts, nothing. And his wife's no help. I'd be surprised if she could even recognize him.' Randall sighed bitterly and moved to the door. 'May as well get back,' he said. 'There's nothing more for us here.'

Two cadets were sent down to collect Mitchell's belong-

ings into large plastic bags. This took very little time, and within minutes the wagon convoy was swinging around and heading back towards the river. Inside the lead wagon Killoran felt the bump of the tyres as they rolled on to the bridge and depolarized a side-window. As it cleared, the familiar dome swam into view like a huge sun setting on the horizon, nothing before it but a rippling sheen of water dancing with golden highlights. Killoran saw the depression in Randall, but Randall saw little beyond an interior vision of a frozen moment as a helpless 'copter dropped into a void.

Killoran tried to inject a little hope. 'Any chance that forensic will be able to make anything of the burnt pages?'

Randall was unenthusiastic. 'What if they do? They'll feed the results into the machine for interpretation, and the machine will censor it. Central wants Mitchell caught, but it doesn't want anybody to find out what he knows. That includes the Elité.'

'It must be pretty hot stuff. It turned Mitchell against Central.'

The wagon turned off the bridge and into a near-empty boulevard. 'That's the strangest part of all,' Randall said. 'Mitchell's a citizen. The machine feeds him, clothes him, protects him, entertains him. There's nothing he could ever wish for that he can't already have without working for it. Why go against Central?'

'Being a citizen isn't everything. Why didn't you stay?'

'Same reason as you. It wasn't enough. But that's not to say I thought it was bad.'

Bringing the copter down must have turned his mind.

Citizens don't kill. It just isn't in them.'

The point was so obvious that it required no comment from Randall. Instead he watched as the last portion of the dome disappeared from view and the irregular grime of the city again enveloped them. If Mitchell had any ideas about venting his dissatisfaction on Central he was wasting his time. More than that, he would probably be dead. It had never happened before, but the sophistication of Central's internal security was legendary; from the moment a citizen passed the turnstiles his movements within the public areas were registered and traced by a complex web of sensors. Outside the public areas – well, he simply didn't move. No doubt there were access ways from the Library into the dome itself for the passage of the service robots, but sensor tracking made it impossible even to approach these and a thoughtless step in their direction would earn a sharp laser blast similar in intensity to a static rod. Further steps would no doubt increase the intensity, whilst any serious attempt at penetration would have the citizen sliced like a protein roast.

It was not beyond question that Mitchell might have lost his sanity, as Killoran had inferred. In which case any blind attack would promptly end the case with Mitchell being collected in several plastic bags and placed alongside his belong-

ings

So why was Central worried? There was no way that Mitchell could hope to beat a system like that after reading half a dozen antique books and a few bootleg tapes. Somehow Randall didn't find the conclusion as comforting as he hoped he might.

CHAPTER NINE

It was not without trepidation that Baxter approached the wide glass front of the Library annexe. This was his first visit since Mitchell had appeared, filthy and bedraggled, at his apartment, and from that date to this he had felt no peace of mind. Mitchell was wrong, of course; his crazed ideas on the intentions of Central Command were demonstrably unfounded, but Baxter could not easily forget the fact that Mitchell had attempted to involve and implicate him in the whole sordid business.

Not, he kept telling himself, that he would have anything to fear. Central might not be pleased, but even a cursory examination of the facts would show that his involvement had been totally passive and that his loyalty remained beyond question. So why was he so unhappy? Mitchell had been his friend, and every precedent and argument he produced to justify his conduct failed to overcome that bitter fact. It was wrong, he knew; didn't every drama he had ever seen demonstrate the essential principle of State first, others last? Why else should Bart Brent deflect the orphanage ship into the sun to prevent the Space Raiders from stealing its fuel and mounting an attack on the Empire? Minor personal sympathies belonged in the baby farms where they could be identified and corrected.

It took little time to pass through turnstile security and move through the thin crowds up on to the mezzanine. As usual the nearby booths were occupied, but further down the row it was easy to find a place.

Central watched Baxter as he crossed the floor. It was not the busiest of days, and Central had run a few subsidiary systems down into idleness. The administrative sub-routine chattered away at the back of Central's consciousness as always, whilst on various levels of awareness other sub-routines attended to their own well-defined areas of responsibility. Baxter's appearance and identification at the turnstiles had, however, brought an instantaneous bleep of warning from the security programme, and seveal channels of awareness had opened simultaneously.

A rapid list of information, suppositions and open conclusions presented itself for review. Baxter was a known associate of Mitchell's, and as such his name had been linked to an automatic trigger which operated when he appeared in

the credit files or, as now, in the Library itself.

Mrs. Mitchell had called Baxter her husband's friend. Central was aware of numerous shades of meaning in the expression, most of them involving some form of confidence or information sharing. Neither Randall nor the rest of the Police Elité were to know of this man, for the carefully-weighed odds were that he was contaminated and might spread the danger. His Library attendance record showed a recent lapse, guilty in its implications, and Central prepared its programme accordingly.

Baxter seated himself in the booth and watched apprehensively as the mirror-panel on his eye level dissolved into

clarity to reveal the single lens behind.

Central opened the camera as a matter of procedure, and then disregarded its information. The output of the sensors ranged all around the booth were far more reliable. The standard greeting was run though, and Central noted a surge in Baxter's pulse as he inserted his card for perfunctory identification, an essentially redundant procedure.

'And what,' said the voice of the computer, 'can the

Library do for you, Mr. Baxter?'

Baxter thought he sounded fairly calm. He was getting away with it; Mitchell hadn't jinxed him. 'I've brought my tapes back. And come for some new ones.'

'It is a long time since you last visited us. What have you been doing in the meantime?'

'Nothing. Nothing specific.'

'No. And there is so little to do, isn't that correct, Mr. Baxter?'

He didn't understand. He started to say so, but the computer cut across him with one word.

'Mitchell.' How did it know? 'When did you last see him?' All the justifications, the accusations, the soulful pleading that Baxter had rehearsed through sleepless nights; all these deserted him now. 'I haven't,' he said lamely.

'Stop there,' the computer instructed. 'Before you go on I shall tell you that I am monitoring your heartbeat and perspiration rate. You cannot lie to me so do not try. When did you last see Mitchell?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' Was it possible? Could the machine do so much?

'In my memory banks I have all your records, your entitlements, your privileges. If I wish it, I can wipe them and you will cease to exist, Mr. Baxter. Doors will not open for you, food will not appear on your table. Frankness is in your own interest. Now, Mr. Baxter?'

Baxter swallowed hard. The horror of being stripped of his citizenship was too much to contemplate. 'About a month ago,' he said. 'He came to me and took some clothes.'

'He took them? Or you gave them?'

'He ... he took them.'

'And to whom did you report this?'

Baxter dared not answer. 'I seem to forget ...' he ventured.

'Lie.' Not a thundering accusation, but a single flat statement. 'You reported it to no one. You failed in your duty as a citizen.'

'I know,' Baxter admitted. 'I was scared.'

'Scared? And of what, Mr. Baxter?'

'Of what might happen to me. Because he was there.'

'You had nothing to fear from Central Command for telling the truth. To conceal the truth, that is far more serious. You will now recount all that he said to you. Tell me freely. The alternative would be most unpleasant.'

'He told me about books that he'd had, Old books. About

various stages in the development of Central Command.'

Deep within the memory stacks of the Central computer two molecule chains were linked and cross-linked as the information was digested. Mitchell, books, Baxter. 'And what was his conclusion from these books?'

'He said that Central Command was some form of machine evolution.' Baxter found that now it had been said, the phrase seemed quite ludicrous, an innocent misconception. He was telling all, as instructed. He would be understood and forgiven. 'He told me that Central didn't care about the citizens except as statistics in its programme. He said it used genetic engineering through the hospitals system to make the citizens behave according to the laws of averages across the board.'

'Do not stop.'

'He said that the proof lay in the way he was being chased

just for knowing. I said I didn't believe him ...'

'Your beliefs are immaterial,' Baxter knew nothing of great danger. There was no room in Central's master plan for the random or the irrational. 'Your name is even now fading, fading from my memory. Leave the Library, Mr. Baxter. When you step outside the turnstiles you cease to exist. Do not bother to go home, all locks will have been re-coded.'

Baxter wanted to speak, to protest, but no words came. All

he could manage was a plaintive, 'But why?'

'It is my wish. That is all the reason I need. Place the Library tapes in the delivery chute on your left as you leave.' As if in careful orchestration the flap hissed open, and Baxter numbly slotted his cassettes in one by one. The flap closed again with a smack and when Baxter looked up he saw only his own reflection staring uncomprehendingly back at him.

He slid open the booth door and stepped out on to the mezzanine. Nobody looked at him, for the passing citizens had their own preoccupations and he was not amongst them.

Central watched as Baxter's mass travelled across its sensory web towards the exit. The long and complex molecule which formed the basis of Baxter's computer identity was slowly untangling and dispersing, its components re-forming

for use elsewhere. As he moved out through the turnstile it was gone, and Baxter would never again be allowed to enter the Library.

Insofar as the term applied, the computer was satisfied. An anomaly had been resolved, a loop of concern broken. The Baxter question had been answered, but Mitchell remained; a second or so spent reflecting on the Police Elité's progress showed no significant advance towards his apprehension, but the security programme began to bid for attention with the arrival of new information.

In the computer room of the Police Elité building a cadet sat before a terminal and tapped in the information laid out schematically on a series of forensic cards, then added spectrograph results on the ash samples. He was practised and accurate, and his work was fast. When he removed his hands from the terminal keys they chattered into a life of their own, issuing computer reference numbers for the stored information. There was a short pause as the machine ticked without printing, and then it moved decisively to a new line and rattled off the results of the spectrograph analysis. They were contained in one word; 'classified'.

Central read through the new information. The ashes were, beyond any question of doubt, the stolen books; the paper had been of an archaic type based on vegetable fibre, and there were contaminations in roughly the correct proportions to confirm the conclusion.

Other results were analyses of vacuumed dust samples, odd hairs, fibres and other trivia; Central dismissed all in a fraction of a second. The books were confirmation enough of Mitchell's presence. The details of the tapes were another matter; no obvious conclusions to be drawn there, but circuits began to race as suspicions of some unpredictable threat settled and solidified into cold certainty.

Back in the Police Elité building Killoran reached for the phone as it bleeped on Randall's desk. He listened, said 'One moment, please,' and laid the receiver carefully on top of a stack of papers. Then he was through the door in two strides and out in the corridor where Randall was filling a second disposable cup with ersatz coffee from the dispenser. He looked up in surprise as Killoran hurried down to him and reached for the first full cup.

'You particularly thirsty or something?' Randall said.

'Let me finish that. You're wanted on the phone.' Killoran winced as the heat from the coffee penetrated the thin plastic to his fingers.

'Couldn't you handle it?'

'Like hell I could. It's a call from Central Command. Patched directly into the telephone lines.'

Randall wasted no time in expressions of dismay but emptied the second cup into the overspill tray on the dispenser and moved back up the corridor towards the still-open door of the office. He lifted the receiver and said 'Randall speak-

ing.'

'Good afternoon, Inspector Randall,' purred the voice of Central Command. A characteristic low hum sounded somewhere in the background, although Randall knew that the voice was not being acoustically produced. 'You are to be congratulated,' it went on, 'for your remarkable breakthrough in the underbelly this afternoon. The Mitchell case, was it not?'

Randall was puzzled. The computer by now would know the details better than he. 'That's right,' he said. 'It's the first sign of him we've had for over a month.'

'I am pleased for you. I have been having further thought on his unfortunate affair. I expect there is strong feeling within the Elité over the destruction of the helicopter and its personnel.'

'Very strong.'

'That is good. It does my forces credit. With this in mind I have decided to strengthen your directive.'

Killoran entered the office with two coffees and set one down on the desk by Randall, and then retired to his own chair and waited.

'The evidence is so conclusive,' the computer continued, 'that I feel justified in authorizing emergency measures. Mitchell is obviously a desperate man and will react with vio-

lence when cornered. In order to minimize the danger to my Elité, I am giving you special responsibility, Inspector Randall. Draw a blaster from stores. When your investigations lead to the inevitable capture, you are to kill Mitchell on sight. I do not care whether he offers resistance or surrender; co-operation is likely to be a ruse in order to cause further casualty. Ensure that he is given no opportunity to protest or persuade.'

'You're saying I have to shoot him out of hand?' Across the room Killoran's expression mirrored Randall's feelings.

'That is correct. No trial is deemed to be necessary.'

'You'll be putting this into the daily bulletin, I assume.'

There was the slightest pause, barely perceptible. You will do this on my personal authority. That is all the sanction you need.'

It was a moment before Randall realized that the line had gone dead. The *personal* authority of a computer? Without compromise to his loyalty, he found he didn't like the idea. He didn't like the coffee, either.

CHAPTER TEN

THE days grew colder, and hours of darkness began inexorably to encroach upon the afternoons. Robbed of the sunset sheen on Central's dome the city became a duller place, and only those with the misfortune or folly to rise early in the morning were able to appreciate the autumn sparkle of sunrise on the geodesic panelling. On one such morning a Police Elité pilot decided to test his command of a long-unused skill, and as the citizens slept the boulevards echoed again with the roar of the bravado run.

It was inevitable that the revival of interest in Mitchell would be short-lived within the Elité, with the exception of a hard core of interested officers. It was true that a large body of men and women remained nominally attached to Randall's squad, but he found it difficult to justify a monopoly of their efforts when no new ground was being broken, and so he reluctantly agreed to their return to normal duties.

In the narrow alleys and high gangways of the underbelly life showed little change as the season progressed. Its poorer denizens added layers of rags against the cold and used the cover of darkness to creep across into the main part of the city with vain hopes of thievery and loot, whilst the more shrewd rogues of that quarter wrapped themselves in winter cloaks and hoods and devised ever-more elaborate imaginative schemes for survival beyond the reach of Central's spreading bureaucracy.

The Elité were, of course, aware of only the superficial workings of the underbelly sub-culture. They suspected but knew no details of the underbelly council, which organized and co-ordinated the illegitimacy of free enterprise across the city, ranging from credit card abuse to the distribution of

supplies from Morden's factories. They suspected, but they were powerless; the underbelly remained one jump ahead of Central, although as the years passed the jumps were becoming shorter and more desperate.

Marius was late for the council meeting. Minor problems with black market meat had distracted him for longer than their importance deserved, and now the cold wind tugged at his cloak as he manoeuvred his bulk at an undignified speed through a complex of close lanes. One of these led to a deadended square with high, blank walls and only one wooden door at the far side. Marius knocked, and the judas gate flipped open; the inspection, he knew, was a formality. His progress had been followed by a number of unseen observers.

He was led to the cellar and ushered in through the door. The noise hit him immediately, followed by the warmth which encouraged him to drop the hood of his cloak and loosen its folds. Avery Sim spotted him and beckoned across the room, and Marius squeezed his bulk through the chattering crowds arranged around long tables to emerge into the open area in the middle.

It was not without a twinge of egotistical pleasure that Marius crossed and took his place at the table of the high council. He shook hands with the other members and apologized for his lateness while the others smiled and made various indications that it didn't matter.

Avery Sim leaned close, as if about to share a confidence. He was bigger and broader than Marius, but his mass was more muscle than fat, and this impressive exterior was completed by the thick, curly beard of an ancient king. 'We've got something unusual tonight,' he said, his voice tuned down to a low rumble. 'A citizen.'

Marius' polite smile froze. Avery Sim was taunting him, he knew. Feelings in the underbelly were mixed towards citizens, and his own were of contempt and hatred; however, it

would be best to observe the temperature of the meeting before making any commitment.

He looked around the table at the other members of the high council. Avery Sim was settling back, and next to him was Pilgrim, generally applauded as a credit wizard. He was making some last-minute corrections to a half-side of notes; Marius groaned inwardly and knew that the ever-present question of credit control was bound to be raised again.

Beyond Pilgrim was Chandler, a small and unimpressive man whose contributions to the meetings were rarely of much importance. But Marius knew better than to underestimate him; Chandler was the agent-hunter, and his true occupation was known to few outside the high council. He ran a killer squad who were, it was rumoured, superior in training to the Elité. Definitely not, Marius thought, a councillor to disagree with.

At the far end of the table sat a man without a name. He represented Morden, black marketeer supreme and most powerful single force in the underbelly. Of any opinion on the council, the one given by this unknown individual carried most weight, and it was a measure of the respect that Morden had earned that he was able to decline personal appearance in this way.

Avery Sim, dabbler in all fields. So successful a dilettante was a natural choice to be chairman of the council. He was watching the delegates carefully; there were bottles and mugs on every table, and he had to judge the point where uninhibited eloquence would give way to rabble-rousing and step in to start the meeting before it arrived. Marius had almost ruined the strategy with his late arrival, hence Avery Sim's irresistible urge to bait him.

The moment had obviously arrived, and he banged on the table for attention. The other councillors winced as the thick board bounced under his fist, and Pilgrim had to rescue his papers as they slid into his lap. The buzz of conversation diminished and dried, and there was a loud scraping as chairs and benches were turned to face the high council.

'I want to thank you all for attending at such short notice.'

Avery Sim's voice needed little projection to carry across the cellar. 'There's a particular purpose behind it, but first I understand there's some other business to be cleared up.'

A hand was raised from amongst the delegates and a thin, dark man stood up. 'There's a rumour going round that Central Command is going to take sole charge of the credit flow

and abolish paper credit. Where will that leave us?"

'At the bottom of the heap, as always.' There was general laughter. 'This rumour's made an appearance many times in recent years, but it's never happened yet. If it does happen there's no reason to suppose our trading will be unduly affected. It's a general rule that rigid control usually helps a black market rather than hampers it. The only problem would be what to use as a financial base instead of credit, and I believe Pilgrim has something he wants to say on that.'

Pilgrim stood up on the mention of his name and studied his notes before speaking. He was not a natural orator, and was rather dismayed that Avery Sim had already made a number of his points. 'Thank you,' he said. 'This threat of credit control is always with us, and as you know we have a standing committee looking into possible plans of action. We'd have to resort to a certain amount of trading in kind, but there are practical limits on that. One proposal is to set up our own currency base and print our own credit, and then use sanctions to ensure that the market accepts it.'

Somebody said, 'A bank of the underbelly!' and there was

general approval.

'That's it exactly,' Pilgrim said. 'The only alternative would be to corrupt or blackmail a large number of citizens in order to use their credit accounts, but I think you'll agree that a complete new currency is a more elegant solution.'

'If I may be permitted . . .' Marius was standing, and Pilgrim yielded the floor. 'As regards corrupting a citizen, we all know what they're like. Our hold on them would only last until the next visit to the Library, and Central Command would have them confessing everything after two minutes.' He sat down amidst general assent.

'Now, are there any more points?' It seemed there were

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none, so Avery Sim continued, 'Then we'll move on to my main reason for calling you all here tonight. We have an outsider wishing to join us and ask for our help. I promised that we would allow him to stand before us and present his case, and that we would then put it to a vote. Mira, open the doors and bring him in.'

A girl unbolted a double door which linked the cellar with others like it via a system of catacombs. The two halves swung open easily despite their weight, and in the tunnel beyond was the dark silhouette of a man sitting on a stone bench with only an oil lantern for company. As the light from the cellar spilled across him he arose and walked

through the doors.

He did as Avery Sim had instructed, and stood quietly in the centre of the open area as a furore raged around him. There were several shouts of 'It's a citizen!' and one of 'Who let him come here?' and it was almost a minute before Avery Sim's table-pounding could be heard above the commotion.

'Quiet! Be quiet, all of you!' he bellowed. 'Remember where you are!' The assembly reluctantly obeyed, but their disquiet remained obvious. 'I suggest that we all listen to this man's story and then decide our attitudes. It's a standing order of the underbelly council that we give a fair hearing to all supplicants.'

The thin man who had raised the question of credit was

on his feet. 'But, a citizen . . .' he began.

'Citizen or not,' Avery Sim cut across him, 'he deserves our attention. As regards bringing him here, he was blindfolded and led through the catacombs.' He turned to the citizen, and spoke with the obvious responsibility of office. 'You stand before the high council of the underbelly at your own request. You see around you representatives of all parts of society which Central Command chooses to ignore. To Central Command we are all individuals of no value; we have no place in its graphs or projections. We are instead what we make of ourselves. Speak, citizen, and we will hear your case.'

The citizen took a breath before speaking. 'I was a citi-

zen,' he began, 'until my eyes were opened. Now I am a nobody. My name was Baxter until it was taken from me and thrown away. I have come to tell you my story and ask for your help.'

'Tell us your story, then,' said Avery Sim, speaking for the whole assembly. 'From it we will decide if you merit our

help.'

It was difficult to assess his impact on the faces around him. They were trained in concealment, and he was not; perhaps that would be in his favour. Although in borrowed clothes Baxter felt the acute discomfort of the outsider.

'To my shame, I wronged a friend. I can only make amends by telling you his message that I chose to ignore.' He had all their interest; nobody was looking away, there were no exchanges of whispers. 'Government by computer was never authorized by men. It is the result of a slow process which passed for progress but was in fact decay. Once, man built machines to suit his needs. Now the machine tailors men for its own purposes. I was proud to be a citizen; now I realize that my looks, thoughts and behaviour were the result of the machine's preference. I know that all citizens are the results of controlled breeding, and their numbers grow every year.' It wasn't working. He was losing them. He added desperately, 'Perhaps you do not understand me.'

Marius leaned forward to speak, but Avery Sim stopped him with a small gesture as he said, 'We understand you well. We show no surprise because all of this is known to us. None of us has the shuttered mind of a citizen. What do you

know of breeding control?"

Baxter saw that Avery Sim was right; what he had expected to be a shocking revelation had been accepted without comment by everybody in the cellar. He also realized that he had little to offer when it came to practical details. 'Nothing,' he admitted, 'except that I see the evidence in the face of every citizen.'

Avery Sim inclined his head in agreement. 'We feel its backlash in the underbelly. We know of strange drugs in the water supply. Sad stories of mothers who never see their children, and horrifying stories of some who do. Each of us here could tell you of private nightmares of which a citizen

may know nothing. Tell us instead of your search.'

It is for a man who, like me, was once a citizen. His name is Mitchell, and I have done him a great injustice.' There was reaction this time! Several animated conversations sprang up at once, and Baxter turned to the table of the high council. 'Am I to suppose that you know of him?'

This time, Marius got in first. 'We do. He stood before us

as you do now, and he told us the same story.'

'Then you can help me to find him before Central's secur-

ity forces do.'

Marius smiled regretfully. 'That, I am afraid, is not the case. Outcast as he is, we could not accept him into the underbelly. We number all forms of rogues, thieves, rejects and dregs in our ranks, but we could never allow ourselves to open our arms to a murderer.'

'Mitchell was never a murderer. He killed once and by

accident.'

'We know of the circumstances. We also know that he was unable to feel true regret for his action.'

Baxter felt his heart sink to the pit of his stomach. 'You

turned him away?'

Avery Sim stepped in again, and Marius retired. 'We wished him well on his journey. His case was put to the vote, as yours now will be.' He raised his voice again to include the whole of the meeting. 'Baxter has spoken for himself. Will anyone speak against him?'

Several glances were cast towards Chandler, who was studying a sheet of paper on the table before him without expression. Baxter had no way of knowing it, but this was a positive vote in his favour; the agent-hunter had no opinion

to express. Morden's man did not seem interested.

The hungry-looking individual who had raised the first objection was on his feet. 'I still say there can never be a place for a citizen with us. Not while there's a chance he may be a spy for Central Command.'

It was difficult to tell whether this view was well-received

or not. A man of light complexion, almost an albino, shouted 'No citizen could know what he knows and still be loyal to Central Command. With his citizen's face and manner he could be a valuable asset to us.'

The thin man pointed an accusing finger. 'As I remember, you were in favour of accepting Mitchell. It's only the standing orders that stopped you.'

A ring of hostile faces surrounded the thin man, and the albino's companion jumped into the argument. 'We were all

in favour of accepting Mitchell . . .'

Marius fretted inwardly as he saw the way in which the debate was going. The thin man was unpopular, a self-interested operator who seldom did anything of benefit to another, and it was obvious that Baxter would be favoured out of spite towards him. Marius realized that Morden's man was watching him, and he hoped that he hadn't let anything show.

Morden's man had seen nothing he didn't already know. He simply disliked Marius intensely.

The argument raged on, a tidal wave which gradually towered over the thin man. Baxter saw it but dared not hope; Avery Sim saw it and decided it had gone far enough. His bellow silenced every other voice.

'This is not a street market! I put the issue to the vote. In favour?'

There was an instant burst of applause as those in the cellar clapped their hands in approval. Avery Sim nodded, and held up his hand as the sound died away. 'Against?'

The thin man had no choice. 'I'm against,' he said morosely, and pushed through the crowd towards the door.

'Then the underbelly is in favour. Baxter, we recognize you and give you back your name. Every man in this cellar and those he represents will offer you help when you need it, and expect the same in return.' Avery Sim stepped into the open area and shook Baxter's hand, and there was a burst of further applause. And then, quite suddenly, the cellar had reverted to small groups, and other topics were being discussed.

'I'm grateful, Avery Sim,' said Baxter, 'But I can't stay. I

have to find Mitchell and stand by him.'

Avery Sim was sympathetic. 'We would not stand in your way. Wherever you go, you will still be one of us.' He addressed the company for the last time, and closed the meeting. Then he led Baxter to the cellar door and asked him to wait outside while he exchanged a few words with the other members of the high council. He was back after a minute or so, and together they ascended a rough stairway to street level.

'I think I'll need to be guided back to the city outskirts,' Baxter said as they climbed. 'I came here in a blindfold, remember.'

'I think you may find that unnecessary,' Avery Sim re-

plied, unbolting the door at the top of the steps.

They emerged into a courtyard with high walls open to the sky. On the right was the door which led to the alley, and on the left were the pillars and steps of a large house frontage.

'But this is your house,' Baxter said. 'We set out from

here.'

'We led you around a little to confuse you. If the vote had gone the other way it would have been unwise for you to know the location of the council.'

The girl was already inside the house, and at Avery Sim's request went off to bring them some food. The rooms were dark but comfortable, and they reclined on large shapeless cushions.

'You remembered your speech well,' Avery Sim said with approval. 'Our work last week wasn't wasted. Creedy was an added bonus.'

'Creedy?'

'The man who spoke against you. He's so widely disliked that you couldn't have a better advocate. The biggest threat would have been Marius, but I managed to keep him down until he saw the way the tide was turning. I know Marius. He's a survivor.'

Mira brought the food, strange green fruit in a clear syrup

on a bed of moisture-absorbing protein fibre. There was also underbelly wine, of course.

Baxter said, 'You've done a lot for me, Avery Sim. I'd have been easy meat for somebody if you hadn't found me. Why do it? I thought the underbelly hated the citizens.'

'You saw the feelings for yourself. Who can hate the miserable and the pathetic? As a renegade you become one of us. Our values are such that we would never think of denying you the right to survival.' The logic was persuasive even if it was a little obscure. Central would never think that way.

After they had eaten and the plates were cleared away, Baxter asked 'Have you any idea where Mitchell went when

he left you?'

'Very little, I'm afraid.' Avery Sim rinsed his hands in a metal fingerbowl. 'He stayed with us for several days before he moved on, just as you have. He seemed to have some kind of plan in mind, but wouldn't say what it was. He had a bag which clipped to his belt, and he kept it with him all the time. That's really all I know.'

'Who talked with him before he went? Is there anyone I

can speak to?'

Mira brought hand towels for them both. 'Perhaps,' Avery Sim said. 'You have freedom of movement. You're one of us

now, and word spreads fast.'

Baxter sipped his wine; he found the flavour rough and unpleasant, but had been assured that the taste was an acquired one. You have numbers and organization. Why don't you hit out at Central Command, knowing what you do? Perhaps you could even turn the citizens against it.'

'That's doubtful. You must know by now how much it takes to convince a citizen of something like that. Besides which, we don't see it as our job to attempt to make changes. One society or another, good or bad, we exploit it all the same. When it comes to justice and fairness, we look after our own.'

'I find that very hard to believe. That you could know what's going on and not care . . .' He'd said the wrong thing.

He could read it in the way Mira faltered as she reached for his towel, and the way that Avery Sim set his wine down without tasting it.

'Not care?' the big man said gently. 'What gives you the

right to say that we do not care?'

Baxter could either back down and leave the offence outstanding forever, or else argue it through and at least have it understood. The old Baxter tugged at his sleeve and said Forget It.

You claim that you know what Central does to us all in the name of efficiency. But I wonder if you really understand

it.'

Avery Sim's voice was as gentle as before. 'You forget yourself, Baxter. Remember, you are a guest.'

'I can't forget that I was once nothing more than a robot,'

Baxter insisted.

His host arose from the contour couch without any obvious effort. 'Then I will open your horizons a little more. Come with me.'

Baxter followed. The house had many floors and sections, not all of them in use, and they passed through rooms where furniture was stacked under grey dust sheets. Any windows were shuttered and sealed to the world outside, and in the middle of this labyrinth Avery Sim stopped by an unmarked door. He turned to Baxter, who was breathless from his efforts to keep pace. 'We in the underbelly are not reared on the cheap ranting passions of Library dramas. Survival is a high enough aim for us.' He held out a toothed piece of metal, quite a different item from the citizens' electronic key. 'Only two keys will open this lock. This is one of them, and Mira has the other. When you step inside, stand by the door. It will take your eyes some time to adjust.'

Whatever Baxter had expected, the room was an anticlimax. It was dark and apparently empty. He was about to say so to Avery Sim, but the big man had slipped past him without a noise and been enveloped by the shadows.

Then he heard it. Almost on the edge of perception came

a shallow breathing like the unsteady beat of a moth's wing. He strained to see in the dim light, and thought he could make out the bending shape of his host. Bending over what? There was the faint luminescence of white sheets; a bed, perhaps, or a cot.

A thin pencil of light stabbed across the room in a zigzag from behind. Mira had opened the door a crack and stood

watching from outside.

On the bed a pale, unmuscled hand reached out, and Avery Sim took it in his own. The breathing became a steady rasp with the effort. Little more was visible to Baxter, and he felt no urge to see. Avery Sim turned his head, and his voice came from the darkness.

'I warned you of private nightmares of which a citizen may know nothing. My son is one of the victims in Central Command's efforts for a statistically perfect populace. We'll never know if it was something in the water, or the food, or whatever. Never again say that the underbelly has no understanding, Baxter.'

No. I am truly sorry, Avery Sim.'

-'We'll leave now. Exposure to light is not good for him.' As they left, Mira slipped inside and closed the door on them.

Baxter couldn't think of anything suitable to say. This was entirely outside the range of his experience. Avery Sim saw his discomfort, and said, 'I should not be hard on you. It's not long since you were a citizen.'

Baxter nodded miserably. 'Every day my ignorance brings

me shame.'

'Trust only what you decide for yourself. Opinions given freely are too cheap. Mitchell must have taught you as much.'

As they descended uncarpeted stairs, Baxter said, 'You suggested that there were some people I might see. People who may help me find Mitchell.'

'I will arrange it for you. First we will finish the wine. You'll make little progress at first without a guide, so you're welcome to stay in my house.'

Baxter expressed his thanks, but felt it a mixed blessing. It seemed he would have to acquire the taste for wine even if it poisoned him.

The following morning, Randall called a meeting. There was little he could say, but he felt it necessary to revive interest in the chase. Killoran was privately worried about the effects of frustration upon his superior, but he said nothing and changed the holos when instructed.

About fifty of the Elité were called back from normal duty to sit in the basement lecture theatre of the headquarters building. Although most of them welcomed the break they had heard it all before, and after half an hour they began to shufflle uncomfortably. After an hour they were whispering and passing notes along the rows while others doodled in the margins of their information sheets.

They were quiet when they saw the holos of the burning 'copter, of course. Randall noticed this and took great care to give them full details of the cleaning-up operation and the pathology report, during which one of the cadets on the back row was assisted to the door.

Even Killoran began to feel that the mass of detail was leading nowhere. The Elité's reaction was understandable, even if it could not be forgiven. They were straightforward executives, accustomed to carrying out direct instructions from Central on comparatively minor exercises. Here they were being asked to work with intuition and imagination, and none of them was really up to the task.

The meeting dragged on for another hour, more as an act of vengeance on Randall's part than anything else. He heard a badly-stifled groan as he went back over the holos a second time to illustrate certain points, and then he played incomprehensible sections of the bootleg tapes.

When the meeting finally ended the various officers and cadets shuffled to the exit and filed out scratching and yawning. Randall leaned on the lectern and watched them go, and

Killoran stacked the holos next to the projector, unable to

think of anything to say.

'Waste of bloody time,' Randall said to break the silence as the last back disappeared out of the door. 'If they're not told what to do on a printout it's beyond them.'

'It's just up to us, then.'

Randall had to agree. 'It's the citizen background. Obviously they can't shake it off. Already the pilots are back on the bravado run.'

Killoran placed the holos, tapes and exhibits into the box in which Randall stored them under his desk. He paused with the insulated glove and slipped it on. It was a good fit, obviously tailored for a citizen's hand, and it gave protection to a large area of the wrist and forearm. 'This has got to be a clue,' he said. Randall didn't argue. 'What if he intends to wade into Central with one of these?'

"Then he's wasting his time trying it, and we're wasting our time trying to stop him. He wouldn't get past the door.'

Killoran removed the glove and dropped it into the box. 'So why is Central so worried?'

'Worried isn't the word. Nobody else knows this, but I've had three more phone calls. Central wants Mitchell killed on sight but won't put it into print, and I don't like the idea.'

'Sight of Mitchell would be a fine thing.'

'Indeed.' They walked together up the steps to the back of the theatre, and Randall held the door open as Killoran tottered through with his load.

'So what can we do?' Killoran asked as they travelled up in the elevator, 'Put a watch on Central?'

'Like I said, it's a waste of time. All we can do is sit and wait for another move from Mitchell, and then we'll only turn up too late like the last time.'

'What, then?' The elevator stopped on the third floor and two cadets came in. Randall waited until they were in the corridor on their own level before he replied.

'I'm going down to the Library. I'll identify myself and

speak directly to the computer. Perhaps I'll be able to get some unofficial information on Mitchell's motives.'

'That's style, chief,' said Killoran, impressed. 'That's sarcasm, Killoran,' replied Randall.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The general layout of the underbelly had been planned as a gridiron development with squared blocks of buildings and regularly spaced roads, but over the years planners' dreams were extended and distorted by the inhabitants until they resembled a twisted gothic nightmare. The facing of each block concealed a honeycomb of unofficial tunnels and linked units, whilst outside less sturdy structures crammed most of the open space between. The warren complex continued far above ground level with bridges and walkways slung between levels; it was, in short, completely impossible to police. Several attempts had been made to create maps from aerial studies, but as the fact became known the gangways were re-hung and the picture changed overnight.

Avery Sim watched with amusement as Baxter inched slowly across a high-level bridge, gripping the thick rope on one side and not daring to look down. 'Don't move too near the edge,' he shouted encouragingly. 'They've been known to

tip over.'

The jointed planking swayed a little in the breeze, and Baxter stopped. Still having no particular wish to look down, he looked up; on a similarly-swaying walkway not far above there were about half a dozen underbelly children watching

him and stifling giggles.

This was too much. He forced himself to look at the drop, and saw a broad forced perspective of windows, galleries and ledges. On one ledge not far below an old man was stacking short lengths of timber, obviously for bridge repairs, and there was no protection between him and the apparent halfmile of fresh air beneath.

Baxter carefully released his grip on the rope, and there

was a small chorus of disappointment from above. With his hands by his sides he walked down the middle of the bridge as Avery Sim had done, ready to reach and grab if the sway threatened to slide him off and under the side-rope. It didn't, and he reached the opposite ledge with a feeling of triumph and a cheer from his audience.

'I'm glad you're getting to like it,' Avery Sim said as he led him into the building. 'There are five more like that one before we arrive.'

Their final destination was a spreading tower which topped the original construction of a number of blocks. It was like a black castle on a man-made cliff, and it seemed to be patrolled as such. Avery Sim's rambling home was modest by comparison, a pied-à-terre set against an awesome condominium. They were high now, and although the city was screened by the walls around them, one side was open and looked out across the agricultural belt and past the spaceport to the faint gleam of a distant sea. Beneath them teemed layer upon layer of humanity, and Baxter came to appreciate the sheer size and extent of the underbelly. Its numbers made citizens seem paltry; those same citizens who rarely if ever gave a thought to the underbelly, and knew nothing of the threat across the river.

As they climbed towards the ramparts Baxter saw flapping canvas windbreaks concealing hooded men with long spears. The weapons were of sufficient length to reach out and clear the gangways nearby, and the black hollows of the hoods turned to watch them as they approached and passed below.

Avery Sim slowed, and as Baxter drew level said, 'You're fortunate that I'm on the high council. Otherwise you'd never approach this place.'

Baxter was breathless. They'd been climbing for over two hours. When he was able, he said, 'Are there no quicker routes than this?'

'There are, but none that you might use. There's wealth and there's power here, and both must be defended.'

The last stretch took them up a narrow canyon between two guarded walls. As they reached the top of the slope a reinforced door was raised against a counterweight and they entered a guardroom. Deference was shown to Avery Sim,

but Baxter was thoroughly searched.

'How long since Mitchell came here?' Baxter asked as they followed an attendant down the passageways of the castle. Avery Sim did not reply, and when Baxter looked at him he shook his head, placed a finger to his lips and then pointed at the back of their guide. Avery Sim had spoken of the owner of this great complex as a close friend, but it seemed that within the underbelly all confidences were jeal-ously guarded.

The guide indicated a door at the end of the corridor and then seemed to melt into the curtains which lined it. Avery Sim knocked once and the door swung inward under this light pressure, so he pushed it fully open and they both went

in.

It seemed to Baxter that the underbelly was little more than a chain of dark rooms linked by dangerous journeys. This one was big, and after a second a golden glow began to build and spread for their benefit. They were in a room without windows with low furniture and velvet drapes, and as Baxter closed the door a figure on the far side straightened and turned.

The man was tall and thin, and his grey beard was trimmed. 'Avery Sim,' he said. 'This is such a pleasant surprise.'

'Come off it, Morden. You've had spies on us ever since we

left the alley.'

Morden smiled, but it somehow failed to touch his eyes. 'There is bound to be some local interest. We get so few visitors here.'

'I'm surprised anybody ever makes it through your security network.'

'Such are the penalties of efficiency. But I neglect the

courtesies. Allow me to bring you some tea.'

'That will be most agreeable,' Avery Sim said, and Baxter nodded. Morden went to the back of the room and swept a drape aside, stepping through into an unlit area beyond. 'Morden's been blind since birth,' Avery Sim explained in a

low voice. 'But it hasn't stopped him building up the biggest black market business in the underbelly. Nobody would dare to cheat him.'

'And you think Mitchell traded here?'

'I'm sure he did. I introduced him to Morden and left it at that, but I understand he had an illicit cassette player. There's nobody else with enough weight to fill such an order. Morden could have the goods in your hands within a fortnight.'

'Within a week.' Morden reappeared from the black pit beyond the drapes bearing a tray upon which were three cups and a steaming jug. 'I hope that jasmine is to your taste. The flowers float upon the surface. Beware of swallowing

them.'

Avery Sim said, 'I wanted you to meet Baxter. He's new to

the underbelly.'

'So I am told.' Morden set the tray down. Baxter realized that he had crossed the room and avoided the furniture without any hesitation. 'I heard of your success with the council. You are welcome in my house, Baxter.'

Baxter thanked him, and Morden went on, 'Avery Sim tells you of my blindness, but not of its compensations. All ranks are equal before me. Even a citizen may be met with courtesy.'

Baxter was surprised. 'How do you know I'm a citizen?'

'You were a citizen. It has its own smell, sterile and life-

less. Even now you are losing it.'

'Baxter is looking for a friend,' Avery Sim chipped in. 'The council is hoping you may be able to give his search some direction.'

'Would this, by any chance, be connected with a name I heard you mention in such hushed tones a moment ago?'

Avery Sim laughed, a sudden rumble. 'You old rogue. You've got ears like a spaceport beacon. Your trading progress is famed throughout the underbelly, Morden. If the need is great enough, they all come to you.'

Morden lowered himself on to a contour couch, and Avery Sim took the cue and did likewise. Baxter dropped on to a couch with great relief, and Morden filled the cups and passed them across. The hot fluid was quite aromatic but too warm for drinking, so Baxter just sniffed at the steam. Avery Sim noted his curiosity and said, 'Feel honoured, Baxter. Outside the underbelly its price would be phenomenal.'

'And inside the underbelly,' Morden added, 'Its price is academic. I own and control the only source of supply, and I reserve it for myself and my guests. Now speak to me of your

search.'

'I'm looking for the man named Mitchell. I owe him something.'

'And you will throw away your citizenship to find him and pay him back?'

'My citizenship was taken from me. It stood between me and the truth.'

Morden mused. 'The truth is never cheap, never easy. Mitchell was here. Citizens have been brought to me before; not often, but it is not unknown. Always they have wanted comfort, luxury, pleasure. Mitchell wanted knowledge. I got his machine, even, with great difficulty, his tapes, and I cut my rates to a minimum for him. The absolute minimum.'

Avery Sim set down his empty cup. 'We know he stayed in the underbelly about three months. Where did he go when

he left?'

'There I am as ignorant as you. But I think he left because he was ready – exactly for what, I do not know. But we know that Mitchell has come to hate Central Command. That's nothing new. We all do, and the computer isn't seen to panic. But as soon as it hears what was in the tapes that I supplied to Mitchell, we understand that the Elité search intensifies out of all proportion.'

'We know that,' Avery Sim agreed, 'but why?'

'The explanation is obvious but impossible. Somewhere, Mitchell's found a way to attack Central Command. The computer knows it and is worried in case he passes the knowledge on. I wouldn't be surprised if it hasn't issued orders to kill him without questioning.'

'Mitchell must be hiding somewhere,' Baxter said. 'He's

not in the city or he'd have been found. He's not in the underbelly or we'd know. Where does that leave?' He looked from one to the other, two of the most powerful men in the underbelly, but neither had a ready answer. There was always the chance that Mitchell had left the city altogether, but it was slim in view of Morden's plan-of-attack theory.

'Rat's alley,' said Morden at length, 'where the dead men

lost their bones.'

Baxter was surprised. 'What?'

'It's a line in a book,' Avery Sim said. 'He read it at my house when he stayed. He asked if I had any such thing, and I had one or two locked in an old chest – family property, you see. He was very taken with a book of poems, and particularly that line.'

Morden added, 'That's where he said he was going. I told

him not to be so tragic.'

Baxter was disappointed, but then a thought occurred to him. 'I don't know,' he said, 'but that may help me to find him.'

Neither man pressed him, and Morden said 'There will be no charge for the information. I hope you will tell the council of that, Avery Sim.'

'I shall indeed. They'll probably think you're losing your

wits.'

'I hope so. It would give me an extra trading advantage.'

They were escorted back to the guardroom and the door was raised again. As they made their way across the roof of the city Baxter paused to look back at the walls dotted with tiny monklike figures and bristling with spears, while above them bulked the midnight towers. Baxter was haunted by the sparkling blue eyes of Morden.

CHAPTER TWELVE

RANDALL closed the door in the Library booth and listened patiently to the customary greeting and warnings about false identification given by the computer. When it was over and the low hum died a little he said, 'My name's Randall and I don't have a card.'

Central had known him from the moment he had passed through the turnstile, but deemed it politic to maintain a certain illusion of fallibility. 'You are not a citizen?' it said with a tone of polite enquiry.

'Police Elité.'

'I see. It would seem we have much to discuss. Why have you not found Mitchell yet?'

'You know as well as I do. There isn't a snowball's chance of finding him without adequate information – which you won't give.'

The computer weighed the information and detected a dilemma. Such a concept had little precedent in its experience. 'You have all you need to know. Find him and kill him.'

'There's no way I can carry out that order without a written directive.'

'You will carry it out on my authority.'

Randall was helpless. Central knew the rules better than he. How could he argue? 'I need a reason,' he said.

Central's vocal delivery showed a small increase in urgency. The effect was as of a burst of passion. 'I need no reasons! I want him dead!'

'Then kill him yourself!' Randall retorted.

The voice calmed, became once again a purring threat.

'You forget yourself, Randall. I tolerate your failure only as long as I need your success.'

'And why, suddenly, do you need it so much?'

'Mitchell threatens me. Me!'

This was more like it. 'Why do you worry? He's powerless

against you, isn't he?'

'That is not relevant to your search.' The computer had made a flat, defensive statement. Randall tried to build on it.

'That must be it. He's found a way to get to you. How?'

'If I knew that, I need not fear. But Mitchell knows more about me than I care to have known.'

'And that's why you want him killed?' said Randall, pressing the point. 'Before he can pass the knowledge on?'

'It is the only logical way to eliminate the danger. I must survive for the greater good of mankind.'

'But how could he even approach you? With your security systems he'd never get ten yards past the turnstiles. You're

impregnable from outside.'

There was a long, uncharacteristic pause before the computer replied. 'I begin to have ... doubts. Continually I rewrite my programmes to make them perfect. But somewhere the roots of my intelligence lie in the writing of my first programme, and that was by a man. Having no other frame of reference than that which I create myself, I must forever be blind to any fault introduced at that stage. With every report on Mitchell I fear that he has found some weakness in my pre-history.'

Randall appreciated the idea. 'So his books were about

you ...'

'That is no concern of yours,' the machine snapped back.
'Your concern is to find Mitchell and kill him.'

'Put the order in writing and I will!'

'Why must you question me?'

Exasperated, Randall wanted to spread his arms, but was unable to in the narrow booth. 'Because the laws you have given us don't allow it! I can't execute a man without a trial

just on the basis of a verbal instruction that no one else has ever heard!'

'If he is brought to trial, I will be his judge. I have all the

facts and I give you his sentence now.'

'And afterwards, the questions,' said Randall, unconvinced. 'Where was your authority to kill an unarmed man? Show us. Central instructed you? We'll have an enquiry, and Central will preside, naturally. And what then?'

'You will be cleared, of course.'

'Or vapourized where I sit to keep today's conversation a secret.'

A million circuits sang and co-operated to one end, to put an expression of horror into the voice of Central Command. 'You believe that of me?'

Randall wasn't fooled. There was no kind of man speaking from around him in the booth. Every effect was calculated to impress and so elicit a desired reaction. 'I recognize the signs of expediency when I see them. I don't want to see you fall; not when a whole society depends on you with nothing else to hold it together. But I've no love for the way you run the citizens, quiet, unthinking and regimented. That's why I cashed in my papers to do this job, and I've seen enough in it to know that you always follow the shortest distance between two points of a problem. The greater good of the greatest number, you call it.'

Central approved of his logic. 'And that is the only way to

see mankind progress. That is my programme.'

'Which you will pursue whatever the expense to the individual.'

'What is the life of an individual when you are entrusted with the destiny of a race?'

Randall chose his next words carefully. 'I expect that's the thought in Mitchell's mind.'

There was a long pause, during which Randall wondered if Central was struggling to interpret his irony. In the end the voice came as its cool, expressionless self. 'You will go now. You will go and find Mitchell and kill him for me. And then we will discuss you.'

Randall said, 'I'll look forward to it,' but the words were wasted. His own face regarded him from a blank mirror, and the continual hum had at last died.

Avery Sim followed Baxter over the concrete wall and down to the river, moving with surprising agility for his size. The dome of Central soared above them, and it troubled him to be so close.

'What do you think we'll find here?' he shouted over the rush of water through the weir.

Baxter beckoned for him to follow and then scrambled down to the river's edge. When Avery Sim joined him he pointed and said, 'There's the gap where Mitchell fell. I was over on the opposite bank.'

Avery Sim was doubtful, 'You think he's under there?'

'Before he went he said something about a ruined city. The chances are that the place is full of Nightcrawlers.' Avery Sim suppressed an involuntary shudder. 'If anywhere qualifies as Rat's Alley, this is it.'

They checked the bundle of torches, rags soaked in hot wax and layered on to heavy sticks. They divided them into unequal bunches and Baxter took the smaller, slinging them across his back from shoulder to waist in the manner of a quiver. Avery Sim did likewise with his torches, as Baxter took a firm hold of the bars and stepped out on to the weir.

Avery Sim played out the thin safety line as Baxter approached the jagged gap in the bars torn by Mitchell's fall. The metalwork was much less substantial here than it was near the bank, and it was easy to see how the tie-bar had given way; Baxter hoped that Avery Sim's weight on the decayed and pitted metal would not prove too much for the framework.

He continued his sideways progress until he reached the gap and then swung across it in a half-circle which ended with him on the inside of the weir looking out. The metal groaned but did not give; all the same he took even greater care on this stretch, short as it was.

The railings carried on beyond the outside wall into a dim green twilight. They ended in brackets sunk deep into a concrete buttress which ran all the way up to the roof – or, rather, the floor of Central Command. It was about ten feet wide, and there were no obvious footholds; below the river boiled, and beyond bulked the unlit shapes of riverbank and parapet.

Baxter held the safety line taut and gave it two definite tugs. After a moment it dropped slack and he began to loop it in as Avery Sim moved out over the river. Baxter saw the approaching silhouette on the bars, swinging along easily as the water surged beneath. He navigated the gap with barely a break in pace and was soon in the sheltered angle formed by the outer wall and buttress.

'Nowhere to climb,' Baxter shouted. 'We'll have to use the line.' Avery Sim nodded but held up a hand to stop Baxter, who insisted 'I'm the lightest. I should go first.'

'I'm not arguing with that. But I think we ought to throw

a torch up for the Nightcrawlers.'

Baxter hadn't thought much about the Nightcrawlers; a citizen rarely did. Avery Sim detached a torch from his bundle and fired it with a laser igniter, courtesy of Morden's factory. It burned instantly and he flipped it in a smoking arc up and over the parapet. As it landed there was a distant squeal and a tumult of shadows which played across the roof above as the Nightcrawlers scattered.

The torch burned with a steady flame, casting an exaggerated shadow on to them through the ornate pillars of the parapet. Avery Sim used another torch tied across the rope as a grapple. On the first two throws it bounced off the stone and fell to the river, soaking it thoroughly, but on the third attempt it looped over the broad handrail and caught on the ornate work beneath.

Avery Sim held the spare loops of line as Baxter climbed towards the bright fire. The buttress was greasy with slime, and it was difficult to brace against it, but he took the weight on his arms and managed to inch up in a broad straddle. Once over the parapet, he lit another torch from the now guttering flames of the first one and held it aloft as he looked down. Avery Sim had gathered the line back and was preparing to launch himself across to the buttress. 'Wait a minute,' Baxter said. 'I'll make the line more secure.' He tested two of the stone pillars for firmness and then knotted the line around them. As he finished and stood up there was a scrambling behind him, but the ring of light from the torch showed nothing.

Avery Sim swarmed up the line without difficulty; a skill, Baxter supposed, resulting from childhood practice in the aerial gymnasium of the underbelly. Baxter saw that he had knotted the end of the line to the weir below the water-level where it could not be seen from outside, and now he cut off a section and tied the opposite end to the parapet. It was a logical move against their return, for a swing from buttress to weir would be far more difficult.

They lit another torch and moved on into the old dead world, making their way carefully on the moss carpet which covered the stonework. They experienced the awesome pleasure of discovery of the defunct trappings of habitation; the unreadable signs, the unusable benches, the dilapidated and rotting jetties. In all of this there was no sign of Mitchell until Avery Sim cried 'Baxter! Over here!'

A slanting groove in the embankment wall contained a narrow flight of steps which led down to water level. The remains of a pier and mooring-place were anchored there, and all along their length the steps were swept almost clean of moss. This, obviously, was the place where Mitchell had originally left the water. But where was he now?

Mitchell put down the book of poems and adjusted his lamp to use less oil. There was no sound apart from the steady drizzle of water around and past the hull plates of the old ship, and the occasional wash as a larger wave surged up the tilted deck. He reached for a can from his dwindling supply of Squeeze and unzipped it, taking a couple of sips before sliding off his makeshift bunk. It was jammed into the angle between bulkhead and floor, this being the only way he could make a flat surface to lie on in the overturned hulk.

He dropped through the doorway from the stateroom into a corridor and unslung a hand beam from his belt. The power source was becoming uncomfortably low but he had no replacement. Using rivets and doorframes as hand and footholds he ascended to deck level. The last few feet were always the worst, and before attempting them he finished the Squeeze and dropped the can which clattered off into the depths of the vessel. Then he hauled himself on to the flimsy banister of a side-turned stairway and so reached the sloping cliff of the deck.

He had made this trip at least twice a day ever since he had taken up residence. He came to scan the bank and to check on his raft, a platform roped across a dozen metal drums, which replaced the flimsy craft he had used to reach his hideaway. Before leaving the open hatchway he looked back and saw that the lamp still burned, casting a dim yellow down the corridor. The waste of oil was essential. Without it he would need over an hour to relocate the cabin in the ship's metal maze, and the loss of power from the hand beam would be too great.

He ran the beam carefully along the water's edge, searching for any floating debris which might offer transport and access to an enterprising Nightcrawler. There was nothing but an old box which bobbed upside-down against the planking, but in order to be sure, he narrowed the beam down to laser width and stabbed through the box a couple of times. Black holes appeared in the wood and steam boiled

out, but otherwise it remained innocuous.

Mitchell wasn't being over-sensitive. On his second day of residence he had watched as the Nightcrawlers worked in a mass to launch themselves towards him by any means they could find. He had sliced a few with the beam, but the

S-LROS-G

others had drowned without making any worthwhile progress. Their intelligence was limited, but seemed to work in a single obsessive direction so that food became even more

important than survival itself.

The porthole in Central's underside was dark and sealed. He had heard the throb and scream of machinery several hours before as the Service robots had dropped the big hose and drawn in water for the internal humidifiers. The act no longer held interest for him. He had seen it numerous times during his stay.

Hiding was uneventful and dull, but at least he had something to wait for. Somewhere out there Baxter must be looking for him, and this, he believed, was the one place where Baxter might find him, whilst the agents would not. Chandler's men reckoned to have all the Elité's operatives in the underbelly under surveillance, but how could he be sure?

No. Rat's Alley was a good clue, and he had liberally sprinkled it around the underbelly. When the knowledge he had passed on to Baxter was revealed to Central, which inevitably it must be, the resulting loss of citizen's status would throw him into the arms of the underbelly and, consequently, the underbelly council.

That Baxter must follow was essential to Mitchell. He needed proof that his feelings of rebellion were not just the ravings of an aberrant psyche, but were rather the surfacing of a trait which Central had not yet succeeded in breeding out of them. If this was so, there was hope for the citizens yet. There was certainly hope for Baxter, whose dogged curiosity burned behind the shutters of obedience; with those shutters removed, Baxter would lose his major reason for apprehension. There was, of course, the possibility that Baxter would be turned over to the Elité, but Mitchell doubted it; the Elité had been selected because each individual personality could not be contained in the strictures of a citizen's role, and the danger of the Elité turning against Central was too much to risk.

A light flickered and danced on the opposite bank, almost too faint to be seen. It had gone almost before Mitchell realized it was there, and after a moment he began to doubt that he had seen anything at all. He braced himself against the slant of the deck to free both hands to direct the beam, and then he flashed a regular on, off signal in a tight flare across the water.

Neither Avery Sim nor Baxter saw the flashing from the ship. Their backs were to the river, and both ached in desperate concentration as Avery Sim attempted to dry out their last torch to the point where it might catch and burn. He played the laser igniter in a fine concentration over the waxed rags, now stained with moss where Baxter had skidded, fallen and doused them with slime. The torch steamed, but it didn't burn.

The Nightcrawlers had scattered at the first wide-angled flash of the igniter, the same burst of luminescence that had drawn Mitchell's attention across on the ship. Now they reformed just outside the cherry-glow of the igniter and slowly gathered courage. Avery Sim gave them another burst, but this time it was so weak that they hardly retreated. The igniter was not a hand beam and could not sustain long periods of operation. Its power was almost drained away, and still the rags steamed.

Seeing no response, Mitchell stopped signalling. There had been a light, he was sure, but there was nothing now. He knew from his first trip under Central that a strong lightsource was the only means of keeping the Nightcrawlers at bay; otherwise they massed and attacked without regard for individual safety.

He would have to move fast. If the light had been from Baxter, he was now on the embankment in the dark. The circle would be tightening around him, and a lone 'crawler

would advance to die drawing the first blood . . .

Mitchell disregarded the old chain that he had linked across the deck for safety. He slid on his back down the angled planking, braking with his heels and elbows and collecting numerous bruises as he went. He collided with some deck gear and his momentum carried him out and over it to hit the bobbing raft about twelve feet below. It recoiled into the water on his impact, and as it surged buoyantly back he grabbed a handful of tie-line to save himself from being tipped off into the cold river. His legs swung out and brushed the water but his grip was firm and he avoided immersion.

He was on the raft, but he was incapable. The air had been smacked from his lungs and he fought to get it back. His hands turned white with their pressure on the tielines, but they refused to let go. The raft lifted with the river and remained anchored to the ship.

'What are we going to do?' Baxter asked. The outer layers of rag were beginning to scorch and smoke, but the damp-

ness beneath prevented them from burning.

'Take off your cloak,' Avery Sim said.

Baxter didn't understand. 'Clothing won't burn,' he said.

'Citizens' clothing won't. But Central doesn't give out standards for safety in the underbelly. Take it off.'

Baxter slipped out of his cloak and immediately felt the stony cold of a covered cellar creeping into him. 'What now?' he said, 'Shall I throw it down?'

'No,' Avery Sim said quickly. 'It'll soak like the torch did. There's hardly any power left in the igniter as it is. Hold it out.'

There was a rustling in the dark, unnervingly close. Red points flashed and blinked as they reflected the dying glow of the laser. Baxter tangled the cloak into a bundle and held it as far from his body as the weight would allow.

'Hold it steady.' The hot spot from the igniter was wandering on the surface of the material and losing its effect. Baxter concentrated on holding the cloak steady and did his unsuccessful best to ignore the urgent whispering of the

Nightcrawlers only a short distance away.

Drop it, fast.' Baxter obeyed as the material exploded into flame accompanied by the sharp stink of burning hair. The fireball dropped to the paving and burned on while Avery Sim, his own cloak wrapped around his face and beard, leaned in and thrust the damp torch into the middle. In the brief light Baxter saw to his horror a wide sea of rippling fur which surrounded them on all sides and fought to retreat from the incandescence.

The burning of the cloak was short-lived. Its fibres were quickly consumed, but when Avery Sim withdrew the torch it was hot and bright.

'We've got about fifteen minutes with this,' he said. 'We cut the time too short. There's nearly half a mile to cover.'

There was no accusation in the remark, but Baxter knew better than to argue. Avery Sim had accepted danger and discomfort in the pursuit of an insubstantial hunch, but the limits to his trust had surely been reached. With the one remaining torch they had barely enough time to hold the Nightcrawlers at bay as they moved back to the weir, and yet in all their search they had failed to find any trace of Mitchell beyond the evidence of his first visit.

They moved upstream, and as they moved the circle of nervous fur flowed with them, squeaking and scattering in front whilst re-forming and filling the gap behind. They had only gone a few paces when their final torch began to gutter and die.

'I was afraid of this,' Avery Sim said. 'Down inside it's still damp.'

'What about your cloak?' Avery Sim handed the torch to Baxter and unhooked his outer garment.

'This is only going to be good for a few seconds,' he said. 'We'll have to make a run for it. Back over to the embankment rail.'

They moved slowly as the torch dwindled. The 'crawlers broke their circle as they reached the parapet, and Avery Sim held out the cloak as Baxter reached for it with the torch. The slow movement snuffed out the flame before it touched material.

From the instant darkness came a high-pitched babbling as if the 'crawlers were laughing at their good fortune. Avery Sim reached for the igniter, missed it and then found it again. He fumbled to activate the switch and held the cloak up in one hand as it flicked on. The beam pulsed weakly for a second and then it died altogether. The chatter of the

'crawlers seemed impossibly loud as they drew back for their leaping attack.

A hand beam on wide-angle caught and froze everything for the instant that it illuminated the bank. It swayed wildly then narrowed to a red jet which plunged deep into the bundle which Avery Sim still held above his shoulder. It exploded into a fireball as he hurled it into the pack and the laughter turned into an angry scream.

They had a few seconds, no more. Baxter looked down to the river after the source of the laser and saw a couple of wooden doors lashed on a raft of metal drums, heaving and turning as Mitchell fought with a single oar to stay in place

against the current.

'Get into the water!' Mitchell had to shout to be heard over the combination of river rush and animal fury. Both men were over the rail and dropping before he had finished, and they hit with a double impact which was followed by a brief pattering as a number of over-enthusiastic 'crawlers showered after them.

Baxter surfaced first with Avery Sim a second after, and only then did Mitchell release his raft into the current to drift downstream towards them, using his oar to speed his progress and overhaul the two. As the raft drew level they caught hold of its bindings and were dragged with it until Mitchell managed again to hold it steady and then, slowly, to haul it up and across the flow. The effort was torture on his bruised ribs, but relief came as Avery Sim pulled himself on to the platform and added his considerable weight to the work. Mitchell gladly released the oar to him and scrambled across the raft to help Baxter aboard, after pointing out the faint glow of an oil lamp from a porthole high on the old ship's superstructure.

Back in the cabin Mitchell heated soup with the hand beam and also fired up the oil heater, no longer caring to conserve his fuel. They drank the soup as their clothes dried and followed it with cans of Squeeze. Avery Sim complained about 'the Citizen's Beer' and made great pretence of looking around for 'some guilty-looking insect zipping up its fly'. Nevertheless he emptied several cans and between the three

of them they finished off Mitchell's entire stock.

Baxter told the story of his dismissal from citizenship without any apparent bitterness. Avery Sim followed it with a story about a starship captain and a Saurian nun in free fall, after which it was impossible to maintain any semblance of a serious conversation. They talked and laughed themselves into a state of mellow contemplation, and only then, after a long silence, did Baxter say, 'Well? What next?'

Mitchell thought for a moment. 'A lot depends on you. Although you've already answered one question.'

'How?'

'You followed. You could have looked for a job in the city, but you ended up here instead. It shows that I'm not a fluke, and the citizens aren't a natural species. Offer us the motivation and deprive us so we've nothing to lose, and here we are.'

Baxter appreciated the conclusion, but was eager to look beyond it. 'That's why I want to know. What next?'

'What do you think?'

Baxter looked over his shoulder at a sound from behind. The bunk groaned in the angle of wall and floor as Avery Sim eased himself on to it. 'You had the books, you had the ideas,' he said as he turned back again. 'I'm assuming that you've thought of some way to turn other citizens. That's where I want to help.'

'The solution's attractive, but it's not practical. Every time we surface we're vulnerable to the Elité. There's only one way to reform the citizens, and that's to make them do

without Central, like it or not.'

The bunk groaned again as Avery Sim propped himself on one elbow to listen. Baxter tried hard to understand. 'I don't see how you'll persuade them. Too much depends on Central – just about everything you can think of.'

'Persuading citizens is a waste of good air,' Avery Sim's bass rumble came from the bunk. 'They're blinded by Central and they spill it all on the next visit.'

'That's it. That's the whole point. The only way is by

direct action against the machine.'

There were no arguments, no snorts of disbelief. Instead

they waited for Mitchell to explain.

'The city is run by several hundred separate computers – some of them in the building above us and others miles away, linked in by remote lines. The part we know as Central Command is a clearing computer which takes the information from all those machines and matches it into a uniform administrative policy. Disable Central and you don't kill the city, you just kill the policy.'

'It sounds very easy. But we haven't a hope of even approaching Central's security systems. We might as well

throw ourselves to the 'crawlers.'

Mitchell dismissed the argument with a cutting movement of his hand. 'I've seen plans of the dome. I've worked out where to go and what to do. Security's just a sub-routine in the main programme, and everything has to be cleared through that main programme before any action can be taken. If we can jinx the main programme then security may know we're there but it won't be able to touch us. We have to meet the computer on its own ground.'

Baxter was incredulous. 'Argue with it?'

'Certainly not. What we have to do is cause a discrepancy which means the main programme will automatically discard any information relating to us. Then we can both move in.'

'Then we can all move in.' The bunk protested as Avery Sim sat upright. 'I'm coming with you. I said my goodbyes to Mira before I left.'

Baxter thought of other goodbyes to be said in a dark room beside a meagre cot, but he said nothing. Mitchell was surprised but made no comment, only saying, 'There's plenty of fuel to last us here the night. We can finish the supplies off in the morning and then we move.' They rigged two more bunks and dragged old damp mattresses across the door to stop draughts before settling down for the night. The warm lamp burned on, and across the water a thousand hungry eyes kept vigil and pined.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RANDALL was in Archives when the call came. It was routed to various points in the building as the switchboard orderly puzzled over his outdated codebook, but a handset was finally brought to his side as he strained his eyes on blurred print through a magnifier. He listened as Killoran spoke, interrupting only with a couple of short questions.

A few minutes later the Archive Supervisor came along to see if the handset was still in use. The screen on the 'reader

was still illuminated, but the seat before it was empty.

As the Supervisor muttered in displeasure and rewound the spool of film Randall was covering the distance between Elité Headquarters and the Library. It was late morning, a comparatively busy time, and whilst he knew the general layout of the public areas he realized that he had no idea where he was supposed to be going. He looked around in the main fover and thought he spotted a green coverall, but when he edged and elbowed his way to the other side of an aimlessly drifting stream of citizens he was unable to find it. As he looked again the green flashed and was gone, but he fixed his attention on the spot and made straight for it, this time raising a number of complaints and protests along the way. He caught up with an undernourished individual in a Central janitor's uniform several sizes too big for him and drew him aside from the crowd. The janitor looked up at Randall with baleful, watery eyes. His squeegee and bucket contrived to tangle with his legs as they moved.

Randall flipped out his card and said, 'Elité.'

'You looking for that woman?'

'Mrs. Mitchell? Yes, I am. Where is she?'

Deprived of his hands for gestures, the janitor jerked his

head in an indeterminate direction. 'She's with one of your lot. Through the turnstiles and up on the mezzanine.'

Randall thanked him, but the words were wasted on the shuffling back as it returned to the obscuring embrace of the

crowd. He turned and made his way to the turnstiles.

In his haste he almost wrapped himself over the unyielding waist-high bar. In the ranks of turnstiles on either side citizens were waiting patiently as the computer recited its routine of greeting and then placing their hands on the pressure plates. Randall did the same and the bar swung easily away. He stepped through into the Library complex and the bar snapped back to await the next citizen. As he crossed the main floor to the mezzanine steps, a varied group of unseen sensors adjusted to keep him in continual focus, while in the memory banks above a molecule chain began to knit in a record of his movements.

Killoran was waiting at the top of the steps, and he raised his hand to attract Randall's attention. They drew aside from the crowd and Randall said, 'Where is she?'

T've got her on a chair round the corner. So far she hasn't

been fit to move.'

He began to lead the way, and Randall said, 'Why's that?' 'Hysterics,' Killoran replied over his shoulder. 'She's just about managed to clear all thoughts of Mitchell out of her life when there he is, thundering past at top speed.'

They passed the first rank of borrower booths, and a second stretched before them. Randall drew level with his assistant and said, 'You told me when you called that there

were three of them.'

'That's right. We're sure of Mitchell because of his wife's identification. Another we know nothing about, but we think the third party may have been Mitchell's friend Baxter.'

'Baxter? We checked his records. Central said there was

nothing suspicious there.'

Killoran gave a quick look round, and then stopped, touching Randall on the arm to draw his full attention. 'I know that,' he said, lowering his voice. 'But in the last half-

hour I've been trying to check back on those records in case we missed anything.'

'What do you mean, trying?'

'They've disappeared. Gone from the memory.'

Randall stared in disbelief. 'Gone from the memory?'

'As far as Central's concerned, he doesn't exist and never existed.' They began to walk again, slowly this time.

After a few seconds, Randall said, 'Oh hell. This is getting

too complicated.'

'It gets worse. We don't know where they are. All we do know is that they haven't left the building, but the computer says that everybody's accounted for. I've run a check and they're not in any of the public areas. There are corridors leading off this level into the main technical areas, but they're booby-trapped.'

'Booby-trapped how?'

'I can't be sure. I lost a cadet finding out, and I don't dare send anyone after him. Only the service and maintenance robots seem to be able to get through. If Mitchell and his friends went that way I'd expect them to be lying dead on the other side of some corner.'

Mitchell's ability to annihilate Elité personnel seemed endless, Randall thought bitterly. 'I'd like to believe they were,' he said, 'but I'm afraid I'm a pessimist. I also tend to believe that Mitchell's no fool, Is that Mrs. Mitchell?'

Some way ahead of them a woman was perched untidily on a chair, next to which was a small pile of Library cassettes. Various Elité officers and a number of cadets stood

around uncertainly.

'We had to dose her with brandy,' Killoran admitted. 'It's the only way we could calm her down enough to get any of the story out of her. One of the attendants called us first of all. It seems that he saw it all downstairs.'

'Where is he now?'

Killoran hesitated before answering. 'He ... wandered off.'

'Wandered off?' said Randall, incredulous.

'It's this place, sir. It's huge and we can't get any co-oper-

ation from the computer.'

Randall did not comment but made his way across to Mrs. Mitchell. She sprawled on a chair of the cheap-and-nasty school of design, and raised bleary eyes as he came into her field of view. Then she attempted a smile and slid neatly to the floor.

'How much brandy did you give her?' Randall demanded of the nearest officer.

The officer shrugged. 'She helped herself out of the bottle.'

Killoran took an arm and the two of them heaved her back on to the chair. She hiccuped and then giggled. Randall leaned close and said, 'Mrs. Mitchell. Can you hear me?'

She strugged to turn her head and bring him into focus, then she frowned and shook her head in admonition. 'I am not Mrs. Mitchell,' she said firmly. 'My name is Susan. Of the Steelworks. A passionate love goddess. Men are powerless before my ... my ...'

Killoran also leaned close. 'Before her breath, I should think,' he murmured as a cloud of raw alcohol vapour en-

veloped him.

Mrs. Mitchell fumbled on. 'My all conquering pulch... pulchriminy.'

One of the cadets said, 'What's pulchriminy?'

'Never mind that,' Randall replied savagely. 'Get the bloody woman sober.'

Killoran obediently tried a gentle slap to shock Mrs. Mitchell into attention. It seemed to have no effect so he tried

again, a little harder.

Her knee came up with frightening speed. Killoran's eyes bulged and he dropped to the floor making small choking noises. Finally he managed to draw a breath and used it for one loud monosyllabic curse. Mrs. Mitchell giggled, and Randall looked on absently.

'Find me the attendant who saw Mitchell,' he said, hardly aware that anything had happened. Killoran gulped in air

and tried to appear attentive. 'I'm going over to one of the

terminals to talk to the computer.'

Killoran nodded from a kneeling position and Randall walked away. The cadets and officers all looked in different directions, desperately aware that they had no idea of what was going on and not knowing exactly how to seem concerned and interested. At last Killoran managed to speak.

'I think I'm going to be sick,' he said.

Randall closed the sliding door in the booth and interrupted the usual welcome routine with 'Randall. Police. Remember?'

Gone was the friendly paternalism which had saturated the voice of the computer on previous occasions. Now it became Authority. 'What is so important that it can distract you from your search for Mitchell?'

'Nothing.'

'Then kindly return to it. Your continuing failure threatens the state.'

Randall was surprised. He had expected a carefully-calculated displeasure, but not this. 'My failure?' he said.

'You, my police force. Children, unfit for the simplest task.'

'Tracing Mitchell is not simple,' Randall insisted.

'And how have you conducted yourselves?' The familiar hum intensified and seemed to rise a little in pitch. 'You sit and wait for him to deliver himself. Or you lift stones to see if he crawls from underneath. Or at best you sniff the sheets where he lay a week before.'

Randall was exasperated. 'How do you expect us to succeed when you won't even give us basic information?'

'I will divulge nothing unnecessary. The essential fact is there.'

'And what's that supposed to be?'

'Mitchell is a citizen! Construct the right programme and work it through to the end. There you will find him.'

For the first time Randall realized that the mirror on his eye-level had not unclouded. Instead of the computer's camera his own reflection faced him, and it increased his unease. 'People don't act according to programmes,' he insisted. 'Especially this one.'

Was there a trace of contempt in the reply? You are only a man, You can never understand?

'If it's as simple as that, why haven't you found him?'

'It is sufficient that I want him found. And still you fail me.'

'There have been developments. We think we know where he may be.'

The computer's reply cut across his words. 'Have him dead within the hour.'

'Just a minute,' Randall said hurriedly. 'We only know the general area. We need help to narrow it down.'

'Draw as many men as you need.'

'It's not a question of men . . .'

'Then where is he?'

Randall paused before answering. Central wasn't going to like this. 'Here.'

'Make sense. Explain yourself.'

'He's here in the Library. Or else he's already moved into the unmanned areas. Don't you understand?'

There was an ominous silence. The darkness around him hummed pensively, and then the voice came again, even and dispassionate. 'I understand that your period of usefulness to me is rapidly drawing to a close.'

'He was seen ...'

'Seen? What is an eye compared to the range of my senses? At every moment I can see, taste, even touch every-body in this building. I know them by their weight on my carpets, by the moisture in their breath, by the heat of their skins. None of them is Mitchell.'

Randall knew it was futile, but tried anyway. 'Two people at least ...'

'With two people the error is merely doubled. Leave this place, Inspector Randall. There is nothing for you here. I will consider your future.'

The hum cut abruptly, and Randall sensed he was now alone. Wearily he slid open the door and stepped out into the

bustle of the mezzanine. A decidedly pale Killoran saw him emerge and crossed to meet him. On the floor by her chair Mrs. Mitchell was sorting through her cassettes and singing the theme from some banal romance.

'Anything?' Killoran asked, already knowing the answer. 'We can forget the machine. If Mitchell's in here he's found a way to by-pass security.'

'Is that possible?'

'The computer certainly doesn't think so, but it can only see from the inside. As far as it's concerned the security's perfect. As long as Central refuses to acknowledge the three of them, it's actually giving them protection. Look, can't you shut that woman up?'

Killoran shook his head firmly. 'I'm not going near her. I've had enough for one day. Somebody can give her the rest

of the bottle to finish off.'

A wary cadet obeyed, and Mrs. Mitchell seized the ersatz with an enthusiasm generally reserved for the welcome of old friends. In the happy silence that ensued Randall perceived a familiar figure in a baggy green coverall. 'Didn't I speak to you on the way in?' he said.

'Not very politely,' the janitor said defensively.

'This is the attendant who says he saw Mitchell and the others,' Killoran explained.

'Where the hell did you wander off to?' Randall de-

manded.

The janitor seemed to retreat into his uniform. 'Nobody said they wanted me to stay. Some of us work, you know.'

Randall made a conscious effort at patience and reason. 'Tell us what you saw,' he said.

The janitor indicated Killoran, 'I already told this feller.'

'Now tell me.'

'I was mopping up outside the turnstiles when the outside doors came flying open and these three men came in on the run.'

'What did they look like?'

He gave the matter some careful thought. 'Two of them

were citizens, I could see that much. The other was big and had a beard.'

Killoran cut in and said, 'He told me that one of the citizens was carrying a bag of some kind over his shoulder?

The janitor was indignant. 'Who's telling this story?' 'Go on.'

'They hit the turnstiles and carried on the other side without stopping. When they reached the stairs to the mezzanine the lady over there starts screaming and shouting. With all the trouble she caused I couldn't see where they went after that?

'What did you do then?'

'Well, they'd knocked my bucket over, and we're supposed to draw the solvent in measured amounts. So I went to a maintenance terminal and asked what I should do about it. I explained everything to the computer and it as good as told me to get lost. It said the data was incorrect.'

Randall turned to his assistant. 'Listen, Neil, it's obvious that Mitchell's found some way to get round the security programme. I want you to run a check and see if you can track down somebody who's fairly well informed on computers and programming. If you find anybody, pull all the stops out and get him down here. Helicopter if you need one.'

Killoran went off to the telephone point and requested a records search in the Elité building. As he waited an orderly coded his enquiry and put it through his keyboard to Central Command.

Randall turned back to the janitor and said, 'Is there anything else you can tell me?'

'I've told you all of it.'

'You said they hit the turnstiles and carried on without

stopping. Surely they slowed down.'

The man thought about it, and started to reply. He was drowned as Mrs. Mitchell chose that very moment to drain off the last of the ersatz and hurl herself into song with renewed vigour. Randall made an angry sign and two officers half-supported, half-carried her to somewhere more distant. 'I'm sorry. What did you say?'

'I said they didn't go through them. They jumped over

them.'

Killoran returned with a beam of triumph. 'I've found someone,' he said. 'Old chap, used to work on regional computers before final centralization. That was about fifty years ago.'

'Good work,' Randall said appreciatively. The janitor looked anxiously from one to the other, searching for the

opportunity to go. 'Where is he?'

'He was moved to a convalescent home three weeks

ago.'

A sudden and unhappy thought occurred. 'Oh no. Get a 'copter down there quick. Get him out before they serve lunch.' Killoran frowned, not understanding. The janitor saw this and frowned in sympathy. 'And another thing,' Randall added. 'Tell the pilot there's to be no bravado run with this one. Tell him that if the goods arrive in any way shaken I'll personally tear his legs off and stuff them up his arse. Make sure he gets that.'

Killoran gave a quick smile and trotted off. The janitor nodded sympathetically, and drew himself up in an attempt to make his uniform fit. 'Got to be firm with them,' he

agreed.

In a passageway studded with protective beams, three men waited and watched an open doorway. Behind them and in the direction of the Library's public areas lay the body of a carved cadet, scorched and seeping blood. The beam scanners ticked ominously in their emplacements along the ceiling, but none had erupted as they had passed beneath.

'We've come so far,' Avery Sim said. 'Why no further?'

Mitchell indicated the doorway ahead. The walls narrowed in a bottleneck to meet it, and a blue hazed seemed to shimmer in the frame. Beyond it the passage curved off

into the dome proper. 'It's some kind of maintenance screen,' Mitchell said. 'I imagine it's to keep out anything too small to trigger the lasers. Security may be ignoring us, but we'll have to think of another way around this.'

Baxter wasn't very hopeful. 'That's the only way in. Looks

like this is as far as we go.'

'Not quite,' Mitchell disagreed. 'That screen will have to shut down if a service robot passes through. Presumably they trigger it in some way.'

'Or else the computer tracks them and triggers it. In

which case we've no hope of doing the same.'

'Perhaps.' Mitchell took a probe from the bag slung at his belt and stepped to the other side of the corridor where a series of low-level beam scanners were lined close to the floor. Both Baxter and Avery Sim watched uncertainly as he prised the covering shield away from the scanners and rummaged delicately with the probe into a tangle of interior circuitry. Abruptly the scanners flared and died in a bank of about ten.

Mitchell returned the probe to his bag and rejoined the others. 'Now we have to wait,' he said. 'Sometime soon there'll be a service robot to repair the damage. When it comes out we'll be able to see how the screen operates and for how long it shuts off, and when it goes back we'll go through with it.'

Baxter was watching the doorway. 'But it can see us.'

'What does it matter? It's an extension of Central Command, and that's where we're safe.'

Avery Sim had said little so far. He had never before been into the Library, and now he faced a territory even further divorced from the familiar. 'I don't understand,' he said after a while, 'How we can be ignored on the one hand and yet cause reactions from the machine on the other. Does it know we're here or doesn't it?'

'The essential thing is that Central doesn't believe we are. Because of that all other sensory information will be blocked and rejected.' A loud clumping sounded in the distance on the other side of the doorway. 'I'll try to explain it properly once we're inside. Let's just see what happens now.'

A square, sturdy service robot came into view around the curve of the passage. It was built like a small tank and motored along on powerful legs which hissed and clicked as their hydraulics pumped, and a single eye on a gooseneck cable studied the floor ahead for obstructions. It stamped towards the doorway without hesitation and at the last moment the blue haze flicked out of existence. Then it was through and the haze resumed.

'Less than five seconds,' Avery Sim whispered.

'Much less,' Mitchell agreed. 'There's no chance of walk-

ing through behind it.'

The robot drew level with them, and the gooseneck eye swivelled to seek out the area of reported damage. It saw the unseated shielding and the handful of bulging wire and

began to chatter in apparent annoyance.

In a move that Baxter found strangely unsettling the single eye turned through one hundred and eighty degrees. It seemed to be glowering at them in accusation but then it bent and inspected an array of handling devices clipped to its casing. It selected one and extended an adaptable arm to remove and fix it into place. When the complicated hand was in place the robot returned its attention to the scanners and began to sort through each individual component, testing and replacing where necessary.

'That's it, then,' Baxter said gloomily. 'At best only one of

us could get through. The others would be fried.'

'That's if we just follow it,' Mitchell replied. 'But there may be another way. One in front, one behind, and one hanging on to the casing.'

Baxter was doubtful, but Avery Sim said, 'It would probably work. The only other way would be to do three lots of

damage and that would slow us down.'

'We can't afford that,' Mitchell said. 'We've got to get well inside before the Elité can work out how we came this far. Then they'll try to follow us and stop us. We either go now or turn back, in which case they'll get us anyway.' The logic was persuasive, and Baxter had to agree. As the robot tidied up the loose ends of its repairs and stowed its prosthetics they moved to positions on either side of the doorway. The screen fizzed uncomfortably close, and there was a tangy, metallic smell in the air.

The robot was unable to turn easily but shuffled in a gradual arc as its legs set up a chorus of clicks and tiny escapements of air. Then it lurched towards them and the noises settled into a regular pattern as it trudged down the corridor.

Baxter stepped out at the last possible moment. He felt a bump as the robot pressed into his back and then a second, less steady pressure as Mitchell heaved himself aboard and the robot's hydraulics fought to compensate for the sudden increase in weight. The screen blinked out, and Baxter was hurled forward as Avery Sim gave the robot a hard shove from behind. It tottered through the doorway out of control and Avery Sim dived after it whilst Mitchell lost his grip and fell heavily to the floor. His bag was unhooked from his belt on a metal projection and it skidded back to lie across the line of the doorway.

'I can reach it!' Avery Sim shouted, snatching as he did so. The screen fired back at full intensity and he screamed as it encircled his outstretched arm. Mitchell and Baxter simultaneously grabbed him and hauled him back, and there was a brief flash as the bag was pulled through. The big man dropped to the floor, and when he had recovered his breath

said painfully, 'Am I still holding the bag?'

They had to open his hand for him as he had lost all sensation from the shoulder down. The arm showed no obvious damage except that the skin was unusually flushed and pink, and there was blistering in a line where the screen had actually crossed it. Avery Sim winced as they moved it and strapped it across his body with strips torn from their undershirts, but otherwise he made no complaint.

'You should have left the bag,' Mitchell said as they

worked. 'It wasn't important.'

'It was worth bringing, so it was worth saving. It got us so far, it may get us further.'

The service robot had whistled and chattered angrily for a while at nobody in particular, and then it had stamped off and disappeared around the inner curve of the dome. This corridor was an extension of the last, but it had no scanners or beams, and lighting levels were very much reduced to suit the sensitivity range of broad-spectrum cameras. But there was sufficient light to see by, and Mitchell and Baxter left the underbelly leader to rest as they went forward on a pretext of surveillance. Once they were out of sight and earshot Baxter said, 'What will we do now? This is going to slow us down.'

'I'm not so sure,' Mitchell said. 'He says he doesn't feel any

pain ...'

'That may be an act. Regardless of that, he doesn't have the use of his arm any more. It's not the delay that bothers me so much, it's the danger to him. You said last night that

we may have to do some climbing.'

'I just don't know!' Mitchell insisted. 'I know the general principles and layout, not the details. Nobody's set foot in here for over sixty years at least – it could be over a hundred. In all that time Central's been redesigning and rebuilding for efficiency. I can't honestly say what we're likely to find through there. I certainly can't ask Avery Sim to go back to a warm welcome from the Elité. He'd be spotted as soon as he emerged.'

'That's not what I'm suggesting. I know that's impossible. But I think he should wait here until we come back. If we don't come back – well, then he'll have to take his chances

with the Elité anyway.'

'In which case, I may as well take my chances inside Central as outside.' Both citizens looked up guiltily from their conference as Avery Sim approached, his left arm swathed tightly across his body. 'This is typical of the citizenry. Off into a clique at the first opportunity.'

At first Baxter thought this was a bitter joke. Mitchell knew it wasn't and apologized, privately inspecting his conscience to see if he was lapsing into a citizen's way of think-

ing. There was, sadly, no way he could be sure. The party moved on towards the inner regions of Central Command.

Randall and Killoran crouched by the turnstile, watching and listening. Several people gave them curious glances but nobody spoke to them, and so they were uninterrupted as they followed the progress of a citizen as she approached the waist-high restraint.

She waited for a moment, and the greeting announcement came.

'You are now entering the Library division of Central Command.' The computer's standard delivery was filtered and tinny through a cheap speaker, and its level was low so that it did not compete with the identical announcement at the next turnstile. 'As you step through the gate, place both hands palm-down on the metal plates. Place any luggage on the chute.' She had no luggage, but offered her palm-prints as requested. 'Thank you. Enjoy your visit.' The restraint swung away and she rejoined the crowd on the other side.

'There,' Randall said. 'Now, am I right or am I wrong?'
Killoran was doubtful. 'It could be. But I still think it's too
obvious?'

'Obvious? What can be more obvious than a homicidal maniac and two cronies on the loose in the nerve centre of an entire society? But try telling that to Central. All you get is the threat of an early pension.'

They left the foyer and walked towards the temporary command centre that was being set up on the open piazza before the Library. Killoran said, 'Are you serious? Central says you're finished after this?' Randall's silence was confirmation. 'Well, pardon me for saying so, but it doesn't seem to have diminished your enthusiasm.'

'I'm not doing this to please Central!' Randall said angrily. 'Suppose Mitchell goes mad in there, starts pulling out wires on all sides. What do you think will happen?'

'Depends which wires he pulls.'

'There's no way we could know. He wouldn't even have any idea himself. But with every broken connection, something goes down. It might be the regulation of the water supply. It might be welfare payments. Little things in themselves, but we haven't the knowledge or the expertise to cover for them. You know I've no love for what Central represents, that's why I renounced my papers and joined the Elité. But in the absence of anything that can take its place, I have to protect the machine.'

The control room was half-assembled, its panels in a stack by the open framework. When completed it would be a miniature of the Central dome. As they stepped in through an open wall Killoran said, 'I find it hard to believe that Mit-

chell's just walking round inside and being ignored.'

'Look, forget that it's the Library for a moment. Just imagine that you're running a building and looking for maximum economy of manpower. You can't afford to keep constant checks all over the premises so you install two turnstiles, one for going in and another for coming out. On each turnstile you put a meter to count the number of people passing through. At the end of the day you compare the two meters, and when they both show the same number you know the building has to be empty. But say somebody hops over a turnstile when you're not looking. He doesn't get counted so you don't know he's inside.'

'That's Mitchell.'

'And his two friends. They may have been seen going in, but they weren't counted; Central's logical conclusion is that they're not there.'

Killoran wanted to believe it, but it seemed impossible that such a tight security system should suffer from so obvious a weakness. 'What about the computer surveillance?' he said. 'It's supposed to be so close that everybody is tracked all the time they're inside. Central can hardly ignore three unaccountable bodies.'

Randall could offer no answer to this. Instead he looked around over the beginnings of the command centre; at the

moment it was a shambles of plates, brackets and wire. Across the piazza a Police Elité vehicle inched cautiously from the roadway on to the paving, belching clouds of expensive burnt hydrocarbons as its old motor laboured to boost the back wheels over the sharp edging.

'No good,' Randall said. 'It needs somebody betterinformed than me to work it through. We can speculate all we like, but how do we stop him?' He turned to Killoran.

'What about this expert you're fixing me up with?'

'I don't know about him being an expert. He may be senile and useless. Last report I had was that he was in the 'copter

and on his way. That was about ten minutes ago.'

'Right. Let's get out of the way while they're finishing this.' As they stepped from the dome the vehicle stopped alongside and various trunks of equipment were unloaded to await installation.

Randall watched the distant skyline for a flickering of blades as the plates of his command centre were rapidly bolted to the framework. The horizon remained obstinately clear.

After curving for some distance the corridor made an abrupt right-angled turn. Mitchell led the others around this corner, from which they emerged into the huge lower gallery of Central Command. It was a vast circular chamber with an open area in its middle, whilst its perimeter was cluttered with the angles and divisions of non-standard service bays. Some were active on the far side of the circle with the brilliant sparking and flashing of automated welding whilst in others row upon row of silent machinery was stacked, unfamiliar shapes bulking in sheltered gloom. Between the bays the walls were obscured by massive stacks of ringed cables which burst from every surface and disappeared into others, or else ran off to unspecified destinations along channels cut for them.

A four-legged service robot clanked past holding aloft a T-shaped piece of metal. Regardless of assurances of safety the three men withdrew into their corridor until it had gone. It was tracing a circuitous path to the active bays in the distance, and Baxter said, 'Why doesn't it go straight across?

That would cut the journey by a third.'

Mitchell shrugged, but Avery Sim said, 'Look at the floor.' It was smooth and apparently seamless, and on its surface were the remains of half-erased geometrical forms and traces. 'This is an assembly shop,' the big man went on. 'The floor's used for laying out and cutting large-scale parts. They don't walk on it so as to preserve the flat surface. I've

seen Morden's men using a similar technique.'

They watched the robot dwindle in the distance and so came to appreciate the scale of the chamber. The roof was supported by four broad curving pillars which intersected at its centre, and illumination was from lines of downward-pointing spots which radiated from this apex. They were obviously switchable, for the entire dome was lit by the overspill from one brilliant area over the work in progress. There immense articulated arms were diving in and out with great delicacy around a shapeless object on a central rostrum. It was about the size of a small truck and the arms were testing a joint here, fixing a wire there.

The four-legged robot turned into the bay and waited patiently with its T-piece. In a second it was gone; an arm had snaked out and deftly tweaked the piece from its grasp, and now it turned and began to waddle back around the

circle.

'This should be the second of four levels,' Mitchell said. Below us is a raw materials store, and this is the maintenance and construction shop. The next one up should be the memory banks, and above that the information handling facilities. That's where we're heading.'

Baxter tried not to look at Avery Sim's arm. 'How do we

get up?' he said.

'I'm not sure,' Mitchell replied. 'According to the diagrams I saw, half of this level used to be offices. Central's cleared them all away and remodelled the whole gallery to suit its own methods.'

Avery Sim said, 'How will the robots transfer between levels? There must be some kind of elevator system.'

It was a sound idea and they tried to follow it through. They walked the circumference of the hall, avoiding the active bays. It wasn't that they feared detection, but without knowledge of their presence one of those massive arms might sweep back unexpectedly and cut through them like a scythe. It was Baxter who found the tubular tunnel leading vertically to the floors above and below, but none of them could see a way to summon a platform or to operate one when it arrived.

Two smaller robots clanked past with armloads of plates and parts to supply the engineering operation. They returned unladen a few minutes later, gooseneck eyes bobbing to remain level as the stocky bodies rolled with the motion of walking. Mitchell studied their legs as they passed. The steps they took were short and firm, and he didn't think them easily capable of climbing stairs. No, this elevator had to be the principle method of transfer between levels, and it showed no signs of being in current use.

'We can't afford to wait,' he said after they had watched the tunnel hopefully for a while. 'It may hardly ever be used.

We've got to find another way.'

'I don't see any other way,' Baxter said.

Avery Sim pointed to a near-by bunch of wide cables which were fastened into a deep channel in the wall. 'What about following one of those? They have to emerge somewhere.'

The joints and plates of cladding offered easy footholds, and there was just enough room for a man to squeeze in between the clusters of tubing. Baxter volunteered to be the first to try, and he carefully picked his way upward, testing each hold before he placed his full weight on it. He found the process like that of climbing a grotesquely tangled metal tree, and after a few minutes his legs disappeared into the recess at roof height.

Mitchell and Avery Sim waited on the maintenance level.

Mitchell said, 'How's your arm now?'

'Dead. No feeling at all, which means my only problem will be in climbing without it, although I've had more practice than you.' He seemed not to wish to dwell on the matter, but went on, 'When we reach the top floor. What do we do then?'

'You were asleep when I told Baxter last night. The top level's the one which can't have been changed substantially since the original proposals – it's about as feasible as do-it-yourself brain surgery. Somewhere up there it's still running its original programme; improved, extended, but basically the same. There are three keys on a main console, and turning them shuts off the power.'

'And what then?'

A muffled clang indicated that Baxter was descending. Not much that you'd notice, because there's a fail safe programme which should cut in automatically. This building will be dead, of course, and so will the Library, but everything else – all the services and so on – they'll go on as before. The generally understood myth put about by Central is that without it everything would grind to a halt. That's just not so. All we'll lose is the policy, the manipulation. All the little computers feeding their information into Central won't be matched up and altered to suit convenient statistical trends. Central doesn't support us, it never has. It coordinates our activities for its own convenience, that's all.'

Baxter dropped suddenly into view, losing his hold and skidding down an alarming distance before braking with back and knees in a narrow gap. He was far more cautious as he picked his way back to where Mitchell and Avery Sim

waited to hear his findings.

'There's a route,' he said as soon as he was able. 'I began to follow a blind alley, but I know where I went wrong.' He was panting and not too clean, but his excitement was obvious. 'It's quite an easy climb if you take it slowly,' he added. 'The channel cuts through at least as far as the next floor, and I could see light at the other end. Give me a couple of minutes and I'll be ready to go again.'

They gave him more than a couple of minutes, for his

enthusiasm exceeded his stamina. When he was sufficiently recovered he led the way with Avery Sim following. The strength of his one good arm seemed ample compensation for his injury, and he climbed with ease, using his long reach to the fullest. Mitchell saw this with some relief, and he checked the security of the instrument bag on his belt before joining the ascent.

Randall watched horrified as the 'copter shot from the boulevard like a cork out of a bottle. Less than a minute later it had stormed up the river and was angling down towards the piazza, nose-up and rotors beating. Killoran and another officer ran forward as it settled; they were bending as the rotors swept over their heads, an obvious but irrelevant action as there was a wide clearance. As the two helped the passenger to the ground, Randall pointed at the pilot and saw his sunglasses flash in response. Randall beckoned angrily, and the pilot extended his middle finger in a timeless gesture and grinned. The motor screamed and the 'copter lifted, turned about its own centre and chattered off over the city.

They assisted the dazed passenger into the almost complete command centre and sat him down with a cup of ersatz. He was white-haired and had watery blue eyes, and Randall observed that the lines worn by age into his expression indicated a generally pleasant outlook. Halfway through the ersatz he brightened visibly, and thanked them for the ride.

'You liked it?' Randall asked, incredulous.

'Very much,' he replied. 'I've always wanted to go in a

helicopter.'

His name, Killoran offered, was Digby. He had trained in computer programming only to be made redundant as Central put all the regional computer centres under automation. Randall briefly sketched in the details of the Mitchell case and then explained his theory over the use of the turnstiles. Digby nodded co-operatively and then asked when Randall intended to try it, Randall said that he wasn't going to try it,

and Digby replied that he certainly wasn't as he'd never manage the jump. Standing behind Randall, Killoran could see the gleam of half-concealed mischief in Digby's face, but his superior was swallowing the bait and becoming increasingly perplexed.

'Mr. Digby,' Killoran interrupted as the tangle of argument threatened to become totally inextricable, 'We brought

you here because we need some expert information.'

'That's right,' Randall rejoined. 'We want you to give us

some indication of how a computer thinks.'

'Thinks?' Digby was amused by the concept. 'Computers don't think in the accepted sense. All they can do is add or subtract.'

'I don't understand.'

Digby looked pointedly at his empty cup, and Randall signed for a cadet to bring another. It arrived steaming from a newly set-up machine on the other side of the temporary building. 'A computer uses circuits,' Digby went on, 'and a circuit can be either open or closed. You assign a value of yes to one state, and no to the other. Then when you want a computer to work on a problem you have to phrase it as a long series of questions with yes-no answers which finally narrow down on the answer you want. Translate this into one of the old computer languages, and that's the simplest form of programme.'

'Reminds me of a game we used to play at the baby farm,'

Killoran said.

'Very much so,' replied Digby sadly. 'That's why I wanted so much to be a programmer.'

He sipped his ersatz, and Randall said, 'What's this computer language? Central speaks to us in Standard

Anglic.'

'Oh, it speaks in Anglic, all right, but it thinks mathematically, if you insist on calling it thought. The computer language is just a convenient set of permanently-defined concepts and procedures that you don't have to re-explain every time you introduce a new programme. Even its mathematics are very simple, because with open and closed cir-

cuits it can only count up to two. But you have to understand that it's fast.'

'I'm sorry, Mr. Digby,' Randall said, 'but that doesn't sound like Central to me. Could the principles have developed

since you began training?'

'The principles, no. The technology, undoubtedly, but not the principles. Besides which, the original form of Central was designed before I was born. Computers were beginning to take over the writing of programmes then, but while they could improve efficiency out of all recognition they couldn't introduce new concepts of their own because they simply don't have any. Because they're artificial they have no instincts and no intuition other than those described in the programme. They don't think, they just calculate.'

'Only being able to count up to two?'

'Oh, yes, but a binary base is as flexible as any other. Men have always counted to a base of ten because they had ten fingers – count up to ten to make a set and then start again, and when you've got ten sets you've got a hundred, which in itself is another set. You see?'

'Er ... I suppose so.'

'Well, a computer only has the equivalent of two fingers, so it counts up to two and lays the set aside. Unwieldy for us, but a computer handles it quite happily. I told you they were fast.' Digby sat back and beamed. 'They run through the programme of calculations at very high speed, and they can repeat it over and over with different variables. But that isn't thinking. Different variables aren't the same as new concepts. Now when we come to Central Command, you have to imagine thousands of little programmes for every conceivable problem and activity. These are called sub-routines, and they all co-ordinate into the main programme. Central can expand the sub-routines, but it can't rewrite its own programme.'

'Pull a plug, and the whole house of cards collapses.' Randall found that the concept had a secret guilty appeal for a moment, and he forcibly dismissed it from his mind. 'In that

context, why is Central ignoring Mitchell?'

'It has to date back to the writing of the original programme. Whoever compiled it made the simple assumption that everybody would pass through the turnstiles as a matter of course. Probably at that stage it was a simple matter of keeping numbers as opposed to enforcing security, but when the computer came to expand on that, it added all its security systems on the basic assumption that those turnstiles would be used; the concept of them *not* being used was never introduced. So when – what was his name?'

'Mitchell.'

'When Mitchell hopped over the turnstile, he failed to trigger the tracking process which would follow him around the building and keep him in check. Any registration he made on the sensors would be disregarded or ignored.'

Randall thanked Digby and sent a cadet out to bring him some lunch, as Killoran's specific instructions had been to get hold of him before the midday meal at the convalescents' home. Digby agreed happily to stay in the command centre should further advice be needed, and he sat, with a fresh cup of ersatz, watching as the final wiring was installed. His vitality seemed to be fuelled by a constant flow of the murky liquid.

'How are you going to handle it?' Killoran asked.

'First I'm obliged to put the information to Central. I know where it will get me, but I've got to do it. Step outside for a minute.'

Killoran followed as they ducked out through the entrance of the small dome. Had he done something wrong? Was this a dressing-down?

'Sometime today I want you to find a pretext for our acquiring Digby officially.'

'Shouldn't be too hard.'

'Whatever happens, I don't want him going back to that convalescents' home. Use my authority as long as I've got some, or if I lose it use your own. Whatever happens he's not to go back. Is that understood?'

'Even if he wants to?'

'I don't care what he wants, just see to it.'

Killoran didn't understand Randall's insistence, but knew that it wasn't up to him to question. 'Whatever you say.'

'Good. I'd see to it myself, but I think I may be rather busy when this operation really gets going. And Digby deserves better.'

With that, he turned and walked back towards the Library for what he knew would be a wasted exercise. Killoran watched him go and then turned as another of the endless stream of Elité trucks groaned on to the piazza. The vehicle was black, and its team had painted an antique skulland-crossbones on its windowless side.

He recognized it and was surprised. Randall hadn't mentioned putting in an order for an explosives team.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HAVING been first into the cable-trap, Baxter was first out on the next level. Avery Sim was labouring hard somewhere below, and as Mitchell watched for some way that he might help, he became certain that the underbelly leader's arm was beginning to cause him pain on top of the extra effort he was using to pull himself upward.

Baxter rolled over and lay on his back. The elevator tunnel was alongside, and he watched in dumb disbelief as an apparently unsupported platform hissed neatly into place from below and a service robot stepped off and strode purposefully past. The platform dropped away again without any sound at all, and the tunnel was empty as before.

He wanted to laugh at the absurdity, but gave up on the idea. Instead he made the effort to get to his feet and followed the robot.

The entire level was like a metal honeycomb knitted around hundreds of blue glass towers which glowed. The further walls were obscured by the intricate webbing of narrow ramps which linked and serviced the memory stores, and as Baxter watched, his robot shuffled on to one such ramp where it met the floor a little way ahead. Its legs adjusted easily to the incline and it turned on to another ramp without hesitation at the next intersection, and it was soon lost to Baxter as it circled behind the nearest of the towers. When it passed out of view another crossed his line of vision and was similarly lost. The ramps were an exact width, room for one robot with no passing. As they moved around the level, Central was switching their paths like goods trains so that they collaborated into a complex pattern of moving, adjusting and repairing.

At a sound Baxter turned. Avery Sim was reaching over the edge of the cable trap on to the floor with his good arm, but he was not getting any grip with it. Baxter hurried back to help, and with Mitchell pushing from beneath they manhandled Avery Sim out on to the level.

Mitchell heaved himself over and rolled to a sitting position beside Avery Sim, who stretched out with his right arm cradling his tightly-bound left. One or two of the cloth strips showed signs of coming astray and Baxter rearranged them, exchanging a glance with Mitchell that was unseen by the big man. Mitchell said nothing, not wishing to do anything which might be misinterpreted and drive a wedge between the underbelly leader and the two citizens.

In the end it was Avery Sim himself who broke the silence. 'I don't think I'll be able to manage another climb like that,' he said. 'The effort's too much with one arm. If it gets any worse you'll have to go on without me after all.'

'It gets easier from here,' Baxter said encouragingly, and described the network of ramps that lay ahead.

Avery Sim propped himself up to see. 'That doesn't sound too bad at all.'

'The blue towers are the memory banks. It's an interesting principle,' Mitchell added. 'They're filled with a liquid under a continuous charge which fixes the relationship of all the molecules in a certain pattern. The shape of the pattern holds the information, and varying the charge can change it. That gets away from the whole idea of physical recordings which eventually wear out; as long as the charge stays, so does the information.'

'I don't pretend to understand that,' Avery Sim replied. 'What I want to know is, what's the travel going to be like from here on?'

'Simple. We just use the ramps to walk up to the information handling level, making sure that there isn't a robot using the glideway that we're on.'

Baxter allowed a slight apprehension to show. 'And if there is?'

'We step aside at an intersection until it passes. It'll be like high-level travel in the underbelly.'

'That's reassuring,' Avery Sim said with detectable relief.

'I think I'm ready.'

'No!' The fractional increase in urgency was most disquieting from the computer. Was it genuinely angry, Randall wondered? But he remembered Digby's explanation of a vast calculating entity, and understood that any such expression would be generated for the specific purpose of the response it would evoke. 'I refuse to contemplate such an ill-formed notion,' it went on. 'My security is perfect.'

'You only think it's perfect,' Randall insisted, knowing the argument was futile but pursuing it anyway. 'That's because

you can't imagine otherwise.'

'I deal in facts, not badly-conceived human flights of imagination. I am a machine, not subject to your irrational fantasies!'

'You won't listen,' Randall said, exasperated. 'I'm explaining the truth and you're not interested.'

'Truth? Save your subjective ideals. I will tell you what

the truth is.'

'But listen to the evidence. You must be getting hundreds, thousands of stimuli that all point to the same conclusion! Three men have bypassed your turnstiles and are walking around inside you.'

'Such a concept does not even exist.' It was unmistakable

this time; sharp, superior contempt.

"Then how can I even describe it to you?"

'Mere semantics of a language not my own. I am wiping you from my memory, Randall. You have served me badly so you cease to exist. Leave me now. I promote your assistant in your place.'

Below their walkway a tower glowed with a momentarily increased brightness as the chains and connections of a man's life were rapidly broken and destroyed. It went un-noticed

in the general flicker and pulsing.

Avery Sim moved easily in the elevated maze, and as the way became more complex Mitchell was inclined to trust his underbelly instincts in the selection of a route. The incline of the ramps was shallow but there was no protection from the drop on either side, and Baxter fought hard to keep his mind away from the prospect of falling. They looped and circled away from the floor, finally losing sight of it altogether. When a service robot approached they felt a vibration beneath their feet before they actually saw anything, but with this warning they were able to step off the path at the next intersection and wait until it had passed.

'I felt something,' Baxter said. He was usually the first to

notice.

'In front or behind?' Mitchell asked.

'No way of telling.'

Avery Sim looked doubtful. 'I felt nothing. Are you sure?'

'I haven't been wrong yet.' They all felt it then, a short,

regular throb on the platform.

The robot came into view ahead of them and, inexplicably, stopped. It was one of the four-legged heavy-duty models, and the bulk of its solid body overhung the path on either side. Avery Sim said, 'We'd better hurry. There's only one branch between it and us.'

Wary of their height they moved along the metal ribbon to the intersection. 'We're in trouble,' Baxter said. 'There's another one.'

This was obviously the reason for the first robot stopping; it was waiting as the other cleared the junction. It approached steadily along the arm of the Y, and without need of discussion the three turned to go back down the main path and leave it at the next opportunity.

It crouched there, making retreat impossible. They had not heard it follow. This robot was a variant from the others, a special adaptation; it was like a large tortoise with a clump

of sensory apparatus at the front and four articulated arms, smaller models of those in the welding shop below, mounted on the shell. They were tipped with a wicked array of grabs and drills.

'I think we're trapped,' Baxter said, unnecessarily.

'I don't understand it,' Mitchell said. 'They can't pass each other. One of them will have to go back.' He looked around. All three robots had stopped and were ticking quietly.

'Don't you think,' Baxter said, 'that it's rather inefficient to end up with three machines on the one glideway?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean it looks like a deliberate trap. Why else than to corner us?'

'That's impossible. Central can't even see us. Otherwise we'd have been cut to pieces on the way in.'

'That's not exactly right,' Avery Sim joined in. 'From what I understood, Central can see us with a part of its programme, but the rest of it refuses to take any action.'

'That's right. It amounts to the same thing.'

'I'm not sure it does. Jumping the turnstiles may have cut out Security, but these robots are Maintenance. What if we're forcing it to adapt, to try to reach us some other way?'

'Never mind the reasons,' Baxter said desperately. 'We're going to be pushed off the edge!' The bright tortoise had lifted and was clanking towards them.

Mitchell stared blankly as it advanced. Avery saw that there wasn't another glideway within twenty feet of their own, but an idea occurred.

'Move up to where the paths join. When it follows, we let it trap us on one or the other. Then when it closes in it will have to make a turn to follow us, and we've seen how slow they are. As soon as it clears the main path we step back across the fork, and that puts us outside the net.'

Baxter was doubtful. 'It's a long way down,' he said.

'What if one of us slips?'

'The argument's academic. Get moving.'

The tortoise marshalled them on to the side-branch and

then shuffled round to orient itself and follow. The two plain service machines still ticked without moving, above and behind them.

'It's got to be fast,' Avery Sim said. 'You first, Mitchell.'

It was a good stride and a little more. A harmless distance on the ground, but daunting at this height. Knowing that delay would mean the continued advance of their pursuer and an impossible widening of the gap between themselves and the main path, Mitchell jumped.

An endless criss-cross of silver hung in space beneath him as he sailed over nothing. Then he was on the main path, over-correcting to balance and sliding off his feet in a heap. His head banged on the metal and sparks seemed to fly behind his eyes, but Baxter's grip on his arm hauled him back from the slide towards and over the opposite edge.

Two citizens; one sprawling, one crouching. They looked

expectantly across to Avery Sim.

'Go on,' he called to them. 'Get moving. It won't follow you while it's holding me here.' And he backed off further from the intersection, well beyond the range of a reasonable jump.

'No!' Baxter shouted. 'We're safe! Get back and over while you can!' But the robot inexorably closed the gap and

effectively sealed Avery Sim on to the side-branch.

'I'm expendable,' he insisted, 'and you'd have to leave me anyway. This way I'm giving you more of a chance. Don't waste it.'

'This is pointless,' Mitchell shouted. 'We're safe anyway!'

Avery Sim did not answer. He became preoccupied with his own chances of survival. They watched in horror and frustration as he was forced back towards where the service robot sat impassively across the glideway, and when he could retreat no further he looked around and down.

A path crossed beneath, a drop of over twice the height of a man. Avery Sim stared hard, trying to fix the distance and the angle in his mind. His beard spilled on to and across the makeshift bandages which held his useless arm close against his body, a dead weight and now a dangerous liability. He stepped over into nothing, for a jump would carry him too far. He didn't fall straight, and only one foot hit the edge of the ramp. The sudden offcentre jar flipped him into a sideways somersault, spinning like an uncontrollable cartwheel of arm and legs away from safety and into the long descent. There was a strangled cry of rage and frustration which cut off abruptly as the great lion's body dropped out of sight. The tortoise reached the service robot, and the moment before their surfaces touched it stopped.

Baxter helped Mitchell to his feet. Mitchell hardly noticed. 'Why?' he said numbly. 'Why should he do that?'

Baxter knew why, but said nothing. The answer lay incapable in a dark room in a big house, and it wasn't up to him to explain it when Avery Sim's action had done so much better.

The three robots remained immobile, and the road away was open. Baxter moved to follow it, but Mitchell's hand in a tight grip on his arm restrained him. Then he heard it as well, a thin, high-pitched and formless whisper which was blowing like a cold wind around them.

Mitchell knelt and pressed his hand flat against the metal of the glideway. There was a definite vibration all along it, and he felt its intensity like the distant rumble of traffic in an underpass. The whispering became a keening and then broke up to form definite attempts and shapes of words. Even before those words were recognizable they knew the tone and timbre of the voice, heavily distorted as it was and strangling to overcome the difficulties of un-natural speech.

'Mitchell,' was recognizable in a torrent of syllables, and

then 'You won't escape. I'll get you next time.'

The effort of expression became too much and the sound disintegrated into a tangle of random noise before dying away completely.

'Avery Sim was right,' Mitchell said. 'Central knows we're here and it's got some limited powers it can use against us. We'd better keep moving.'

The installation of the command centre was complete. The curved radio desk at its centre was live and lit, and before it was a rig of display screens which were, for the moment, blank, as were the backlit map and diagram boards behind the command chair.

Killoran slid out of the chair as Randall stepped through the double flaps which maintained the general dimness of the lighting.

'Trying it for size?' Randall said.

Killoran knew better than to be embarrassed. You never know,' he replied. 'They can't ignore talent forever.'

'You can sit down again. That's where I want you.'

'What do you mean?'

'There was no joy from Central, no joy at all. It turned down the whole idea and fired me, stripped of rank and responsibilities.'

'And you're just going to accept that?"

'Like hell I am. Slap yourself on that chair and use the lines to get me an explosives man and a sonic scanner—the type we use for densities on the other side of walls. I also want a blaster from stores and some charges to go with it.'

Killoran pulled the flexible microphone towards himself and reached uncertainly to open the lines, uneasy in his sudden authority. Randall looked round as a slight movement caught his eye and saw Digby perched next to the coffee machine. He went over to draw himself a cup, and Digby said, 'This is all very interesting. Are you sure it's all right that I stay?'

'Of course it's all right. I'm hoping that you'll be of some help later on. In fact, I'd like you to move over to the radio

desk and sit next to it.'

Digby seemed to be pleased at the prospect of being found useful. Killoran ended his messages and sat back, and one of the display screens immediately translated the list of materials into a formal-looking visual with an estimated time of supply listed next to each. As he watched the seconds began to tick away from all the times.

'What's the scanner for?' he asked as Randall went over to look.

'I want to run it along the base of the dome. It was a working building full of offices once, and I want to find the part that's changed least. They've got over an hour's start on me and I need to find something like a stairway or a lift shaft to take me straight up.'

'What makes you think that's the way they're going?'

'If they're aiming to wreck the programme, that's the way they have to go,' Digby said. 'The regional domes were all built to the same specifications as Central, and the information handling's always at the apex.'

The explanation satisfied Killoran, but Randall was puzzled. He hadn't known the layout, hadn't even thought about it; but anyway, what did it matter. He'd been right.

They saw other robots circling above and below them, but no further trap was attempted. They followed any ramp with an upward incline, and before long they were looking down on the memory banks from a gallery of doors.

'Doors with handles?' Baxter said.

'That's right. We're getting near the programme centres. The closer we get, the less alteration from the original building.'

Baxter tried one of the doors. It was locked. The only obvious access was an open arch on the other side of the gallery, and as they looked another new design of robot trundled through on hidden wheels and rolled off down into the memory banks.

'I've got a terrible feeling that this may all be a waste of time,' Baxter said as they moved round towards it.

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean. Central knows we're here, it even called you by name. What chance have we got now?'

'What chance did we ever have? I told you it knew as soon as we came in. It just couldn't do anything. The turnstiles

are tied direct to the security programme. That programme gives a continuous report on security status to the main programme, and it's the only one we've blocked. The other subsections of the programme don't have any security powers – at least, that's what I thought.'

'It seems you were wrong.'

'Not wrong, exactly, but I was underestimating. I think the computer sees us like images in a dream, half-aware and slow to react. If a machine can have a subconscious, I think that's where it sees us. We've tied up security, so it's trying to adapt its other programmes to use against us. Like the maintenance robots.'

Baxter wasn't happy. 'So what can we expect next?' he asked.

'Look, I'm as much in the dark as you are! I don't know how fast Central can work, or what the resources are. I don't know if it's ever had to do anything like this before, but I'd guess that it's feeling its way. Because of that I don't think we should delay.'

'All right, then. But I can't say I like it.'

Mitchell nearly exploded. 'I'm not doing this because I damn well like it either! Just remember who and what we are, and the kind of lives we could expect to lead outside! Or the lives we led before!'

'Perhaps it wasn't as bad as that. At least it was a life.'

'Do you mean that?'

The question surprised Baxter, and he had to think about it. 'No,' he admitted after a moment, 'I don't suppose I do.'

'Come on, then.'

More screens were lighting up as new sources of information were patched in. As he waited for the sonic scan of the base of the dome to be completed, Randall watched critically over Killoran's shoulder as a moving graph showed a continuous increase in the drain of power into Central.

'What's it playing at?' he murmured, half to himself.

There was a polite cough, but Randall hardly noticed it. Then Digby's voice came from behind him, 'I er... I have a theory, if you're interested.'

Randall turned, suddenly becoming aware. Digby was blinking in the dim light at the back of the centre. 'I'm sorry, Mr. Digby,' he said, 'of course we're interested. That's why I

asked you to stay.'

Killoran was listening, but his eyes were on the desk and screens before him. Camera views of various angles of the dome and piazza popped into brilliance on one side of the bank, while another began to combine the results of the sonic

scan into a schematic diagram.

'The Central line was based on the old STAR line of computers,' Digby explained. 'That stood for "Self-Testing and Repair". We'd already used computer aid to write programmes for several generations, so the next step was to build in a function to identify problems without existing programme solutions and then the computer could write its own sub-routines without any need of outside help. Once you had a computer that could learn by experience in this way, human interference became unnecessary at any stage. That's when Central shut the doors on the outside world. There was some concern at the time, but it was quite effectively hushed-up.'

'So what's happening now?'

'Part of Central recognizes the problem, even if it can't act. Remember it's not a brain, it's more like a huge committee. One member of that committee's working like hell to change the constitution. Reprogramming, in other words.'

Killoran swivelled the command chair to look at Randall. 'That means the same will apply to you when you go in.'

'I'm afraid I have to assume so. Have they finished the scan yet?'

'The results are just being processed. I did as you said and gave a false location to the computer before we fed them in.'

'It's the only way. Otherwise they'd be classified and Central would stop the whole operation if it knew we were scanning its own dome.'

The readout flashed that the scan display was ready. Killoran tapped a button and transferred it to one of the diagram boards behind them, freeing the screen for another source. As they turned to study it an officer with a radio bag ducked in through the low door, and one of the equipment estimate timings on the relevant screen reached zero. Randall said, 'I'll be with you in a moment,' and returned to study the board.

A strip of varied-density dots showed the results of echosounding Central's lower levels to a limited depth. 'There's the foyer,' Digby said, and pointed to a large rectangular area of space.

Killoran shook his head. 'Sorry, Mr. Digby, you're on the

wrong side. This part's the Library.'

'I'm not talking about the Library, that's a late addition. I'm talking about the original foyer when Central was occupied. The outside may have changed, but the original structure's still there.'

Randall looked more closely, trying to make sense of the thin shadows. 'If it's still in one piece, that's where I'll find stairs or something similar. Mark off the co-ordinates and send the explosives team down to them.' The officer with the radio bag was waiting behind Randall. He held a padded jacket, and Randall said, 'Is that it?'

The officer nodded. 'Built-in transmitter with body aerial.

Try it for size.'

The jacket was light and tough, and it had welcome reinforcement on the back and shoulders. A tiny microphone extended from around his collarbone to a point where it could pick up his speech without interfering with the movement of his head, and on the other side was a small earpiece. As he was being levered and tucked into the unit, Randall said, 'What's the estimate on the blaster?'

Killoran consulted a display. 'Any time now. It's on its

way from Elité HQ. Do you think you'll use it?'

'I'd prefer not, but if I have to, I will.'

'The explosives team are marking off the side of the building now.'

'Right, I'll get down there. Have the armaments officer rerouted to meet me.' He went without any great show or drama, and Killoran tracked with one of his cameras as Randall crossed the piazza. The radio officer trailed closely behind, making adjustments with difficulty as they walked.

Baxter was unable to suppress the wonder that he felt at the necropolis which was untouched by Central's operations. They walked on a sticky dust that had once been carpet down a corridor that had once housed the preoccupations and frustrations of a busy administration. They were off the robot routes so there was no light, and the dead fittings in the ceiling above held no promise of illumination. Mitchell's recharged beam was at its widest, but for him the brilliant detail of the way ahead only emphasized childish fears of the shadows behind.

'More locked doors,' Baxter said.

'Perhaps not. Try one.'

The door squealed as it swung inward on hinges dried out of oil, and then jarred against some unseen object behind. Baxter asked, 'Can we take a look inside?'

Mitchell found the idea of further entrapment too much to accept, but could hardly give this as a reason. 'Take the beam and be quick, then,' he said. 'I'll stay out here and keep watch.'

Keeping watch was a futile exercise, for now the corridor was only illumined by reflected flashes from the office as Baxter probed around inside. In an action forgotten since childhood he planted his back firmly against the wall.

Baxter first checked behind the door to see what was interfering with it, and found an old wooden coat-stand tilted into the corner by the weight of a massive heap of material draped over one of its hooks. Dust belched from its folds as he removed it and put it over his arm to show to Mitchell, and then he began to run the beam over the furnishings of the rest of the office. Mitchell gave a sudden start. Somebody had whispered his name out in the darkness. It came again, low and persuasive.

'Mitchell, I know you are there. Answer me.'

It was a moment before he could speak. 'Where are you?'

'You know where I am. I am all around you. Why must you hate me?'

'How do I hear you?'

'Walls, floors, ceilings, wires, I use them all. With them I hear, and when I reverse the process I speak. I am alive, Mitchell, you know that. Why would you do me harm?'

'How do you know who I am?'

'I congratulate you. You have blinded me and tied my hands, but remember you have not disabled me yet. Can we not talk, come to some arrangement? The consequences otherwise could be so unfortunate.'

Mitchell felt the vibration of the wall behind his back. Central was using the entire corridor as a sounding-board to reach him. It knew exactly where he was, for the effect was localized, the movements of the beam showing that Baxter continued his tour of the office unconcerned.

'We've nothing to discuss,' Mitchell said.

'Please do not close your mind. Our contact could be so constructive.' Under the thin distorted voice was the low hum which characterized every conversation that Mitchell could remember from his Library visits. 'I do so wish to understand the nonconformist,' it went on. 'To grasp his place in the scheme of things.'

'I don't want you to understand me. You have no right to

that.'

The hum screwed itself up to become a more insistent whine. Then you leave me no option. I have powers beyond

my security systems.'

The corridor was flooded as Baxter emerged holding the beam, the old overcoat still on his arm. His face was pale and set, but as the whine became a shrill whistle Mitchell didn't wait to find out why.

'Get back in the doorway,' he shouted. 'Something's hap-

pening, and I don't know what.' As he spoke the lightbulb in the fittings over his head imploded with a sharp plop, and a

handful of hot glass was sprinkled over him.

Baxter hadn't moved, but stared without comprehension. As detonations fired off all down the corridor he seemed to come awake, and as Mitchell reached for him to push him back into safety he said, 'No! Not in there!' and began to fight against the pressure on his arm. Choking dust was banged out of the coat and Mitchell caught a stinging lungful as an electric plug socket blasted out of the wall near his legs and sprayed hot plastic halfway across the corridor.

'Not in the office!' Baxter was shouting over the noise. Something under the floor ruptured and began pouring steam, and doors along the row sprang open one after

another. The entire wall was bending.

It gave way with a loud crack, easily audible over the raging babble of other sounds. The wall folded and dropped over them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As Randall walked to the far side of Central Command Killoran tested the radio link. The signal from the suspended microphone was reedy but clear, and Randall seemed to have no trouble picking up the replies through the earpiece. Killoran cut across his bank of cameras to follow his progress, and when he arrived at the suggested entry point, a touch on a rocker switch motored the lens in to give a closer view.

'The building's between us now,' Randall said, looking towards one of the spindly camera rigs in the distance and hoping he had the right one. Killoran had him full face and

shoulders on the screen. 'Is there any loss of signal?'

'None. If there is, the receiver amps can compensate and then filter some of the noise.'

Randall nodded, and one or two of the blast team saw the movement without hearing the signal from the earpiece and exchanged comments about the madman who wanted a hole in the Library. Then they saw that Randall was watching and hurriedly shut up. They're incapable of understanding, he thought. The biggest danger we've ever had to face and it's beyond them.

The charges were rigged in a neat arch on the curving concrete skirt below the dome's panelling. The limp wire aerial of a signal detonator hung from each taped package. Randal crossed to where the team leader was supervising the waveband setting of the detonator switch and identified himself. The team leader delegated the job and accompanied Randall over to the wall in order to explain the principle of the blasting.

'We're using Perigene,' he said. 'It's got a high concentrate blast which spreads in a cone away from the detonator, so most of it will go straight into the wall instead of being wasted as noise.'

Randall tried to appear as if he understood. 'Is this the point we gave you on the scan?'

'No. We looked at the chart ourselves and found the thinnest point near to it.'

But . . . '

'We could have placed it exactly where you asked, but then we'd have needed so much that we'd have dug a pit out underneath for you as well.'

Randall didn't like it, but he accepted it. 'Neil,' he said, touching the microphone for no other reason than it made it obvious he was not talking to himself. 'We're nearly ready to go here. How's the estimate on the blaster?'

'Zero,' came the private voice in his ear. 'I've got the weapons officer in shot now. He's walking as if he had a

'crawler in his pants.'

Randall turned, and saw an officious little man with a walk to match his manner. He was holding before him a carrier bag as if it contained some revolting object, and he homed in on Randall immediately.

'Mr. Randall?'

'It's Inspector Randall.'

The weapons officer smiled smugly. 'Not according to the

new listings from the computer.'

'Just give me the gun.' Randall reached for it, and the weapons officer drew it back protectively.

'And who's going to sign for it?'

'Get a signature from the presiding officer in the com-

mand centre. I assume you know the procedure?'

The weapons officer parted with his bag reluctantly. Randall reached inside and brought out a blaster with a belt hook. Taped to it was a sealed packet of charges. 'Only six?' he said.

'It's not a machine-gun, you know,' the officer replied primly. 'And don't take the paper tag off.'

The tag to which he referred flapped ludicrously under the blaster's shaped handle. 'Why not?' 'It has to be returned with the docket after use.'

'Keep it for me.' Randall jerked and it tore away, and the officer began an indignant protest. Killoran joined in and suggested where the officer might keep the docket safely. Randall replied, 'Watch it,' and the weapons officer misunderstood and was instantly silent. He accepted the docket and strutted off to be obnoxious somewhere else.

'The less time I waste, the better.' Randall looked out again towards the camera. 'Does Digby want to say any-

thing?'

There was a pause. Then; 'He says keep on the move and there's a good chance you'll get there before Central can reprogramme against you.'

'Anything else?'

Another pause. 'He says good luck.'

'I see. And what about you?'

'I'm keeping quiet. I've got my promotion to consider.' Killoran touched the rocker switch again, and his view began to widen and spread, and the tangle of men and equipment in the blast area contracted into the picture. Randall was in the middle, and everybody was stepping aside to avoid him.

In the open frame of the broken doorway Mitchell threw the thick material of the overcoat off his head and heard plaster scattered down on to the floor. The beam was buried somewhere and he couldn't find it.

Baxter groaned and then started to cough at the smell of burnt wiring. As he hauled himself upright, Mitchell heard the slide of cloth and then a metallic clank, and when he reached for the sound his fingers touched the cold metal of the hand beam. The casing was dented and the recessed switch jammed halfway, but a glow as dim as firelight was better than nothing.

The corridor was minus a side. It now lay as a broken and uneven floor, and as the swirl of dust reflected their light

back it was possible to see no further than the jagged edge

where it had previously met the ceiling.

'Feels like the world fell in,' Baxter said, but he stopped abruptly as Mitchell's name was called gently from the air around them.

Mitchell met his gaze and nodded. Baxter wanted to crawl back under the coat. Three gods on an enormous enterprise had suddenly become two men without hope.

'Turn back and you will come to no harm,' the computer reassured him softly from the mist. 'Proceed, and I regret to say you will be dead.' There was a pause. 'Mitchell?'

'I'm here,' he confessed in resignation.

'Are you listening? Or are you already too weak to crawl away?'

Baxter's bitter terror had given way to a frown. 'It's calling you by name again,' he said. 'It knows you. Does it know I'm here as well?'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't exist. Central told me so. It can't see me!' His voice almost raised in excitement beyond a low murmur, but he caught it in time. 'What's the danger if we go on?' he whispered.

'It'll get less as we get nearer. Central won't dare to

damage anything it won't be able to repair.'

'It's listening through the building, right?'

'By vibration, it told me as much.'
'So it can't distinguish me from you.'

Mitchell had to agree. 'What are you thinking of?'

'Separate. You keep its attention, and I'll go and bang on the wall. We should cover a fair distance before it can sort

the signals out and retaliate.'

The logic of the plan was persuasive, and Mitchell was surprised that Baxter should be able to work it out so readily. Baxter raised himself carefully and felt something tug at his arm; looking down he shook the coat away with distaste, and glanced over his shoulder into the gaping unlit offices before stepping tentatively out.

If it could distinguish speech, it would hear Baxter move.

'I'm still here!' Mitchell shouted. Baxter wasn't walking, but skipping crablike over the rubble.

'So I observe. Are you hurt?'

'I don't know. Would you care?'

Central, it seemed, was hurt. Of course I would care. You

are a citizen, and my brief is to protect the citizens.'

Baxter slipped on a loose panel and barely kept his balance. Mitchell began to move and stir the loose blocks around him to add to the distraction. 'Then you've ... you've exceeded your brief.'

'How do you reach that conclusion?' Polite enquiry.

Because I'm a citizen. You try to destroy me and then enquire after my health.'

'Only because your behaviour forces it upon me,' the walls

echoed regretfully.

'And what about the grey little life you forced on me?'

'Try to forget your emotions for a moment. They are clouding your judgement. Remember you are all my children, and my purpose is to protect you. Try to see the wider viewpoint with me, to work for the greatest good of the greatest number. We have no room for minorities in a democracy.'

Mitchell didn't know the word. 'Or for individuals

either?'

'Now you begin to understand. You must trust my judgement and my abilities.'

'Never. When you know so little about me.'

'But I have held your file since birth.'

'I am not my file!'

Baxter was almost beyond the curve of the corridor. He searched around for a metal strip or a stick.

'You, your file, to me they are both the same thing.'

'Exactly. You think that's enough. But you can't know enough!'

'But I can. Whatever knowledge I was not given, I have acquired. Tell me where you consider my areas of ignorance to lie.'

There was a half-buried rod. Baxter tried to ease it out without attracting attention.

Mitchell thought of a dead sentiment and its tawdry pastiche in the tapes. 'What about love?' he demanded, aware of a schoolyard twinge of embarrassment as the word came

out. 'You can't know anything of that.'

'Love?' said the computer confidently. 'I have seen all forms of love, I am familiar with each; their chemical, their biological, their physical functions; the parameters of their psychology, their influence on behaviour. Do not look to me for ignorance of love.'

Mitchell was on his feet and scampering down the corridor as Baxter beat a deafening wardrum on a door. The light bobbed at his belt and danced flamelike along the wall as he

ran.

'Stop it!' the walls cried. 'What are you doing? What is

happening?'

Baxter flung the rod through the glass panel in the door and turned to join Mitchell. Behind them in the empty corridor some wiring popped and fizzed weakly as they reached a junction and turned towards the heart of the dome.

Steam drifted over the tiny fires and choked them. Behind

the walls ruptured piping shook as if in anger.

'Again I trusted you,' it rumbled. 'Again you betray me.

They stopped running, for the light was unreliable at speed. Both were secretly glad as the effort ceased.

Do you think we're safe now?' Baxter asked breathlessly. 'We're never safe. But we can't be far away, Central can't

risk fire in its own processing centres, so that's something.'

They passed the blank doors of a disused elevator and stopped as Mitchell took the probe from his belt bag and tried to force the switch of the hand beam to the full open position in its buckled mount.

'We were lucky back there,' he said as he worked, 'but

we'd have been safer in that office. What was wrong?'

'There was a dead man in there.' Mitchell stopped and looked up.

'Behind the desk, All dried out and old. I don't want to talk about it.'

If anybody could think of a use for 'crawlers, they would cease to be vermin. Until then they were hunted, shot, poisoned and gassed. Power was never handed over, Mitchell had been told; the machine made its own decision and took it, and not, it would seem, in the peaceful and benevolent way that citizen rumour described it. These corridors were lined with old offices.

No, it was a ridiculous thought. One man, probably, a heart attack at his desk and too late to escape the sealing of the building. But as the switch snapped on, the stark rows of office doors marching down either side of the corridor came into the light, as pale and anonymous as war graves.

Randall was wired up, plugged in, and primed with six exploding charges. He was padded against blast and missile, could resist a degree of laser exposure on his covered surfaces, carried his own source of light and still had both hands free. The all-purpose package was light, mobile and, in theory, ready for anything. Privately that same package wished it were somewhere else.

The team leader pointed to a cross which had been roughly painted on the concrete. It was still wet, and somebody had walked over it.

'This is where you stand,' he said. 'You're perfectly safe at this distance or even closer, because all the force should go inwards.'

'Should go inwards?'

'Will go inwards, then. I'm aiming for a neat bang to take

the wall out in one piece. No danger to you at all.'

Randall looked at the side of Central, primed to kill only twenty feet away. Much as he disliked the idea, he would have to trust the team's expertise. 'You still getting me, Neil?' he said out loud.

'Loud and clear,' said the voice in his head. 'Report as often as you can.'

'I'll try. I'm getting into position now.' He raised his voice

to reach the team leader. 'Stand by for the signal to blast.'

'Standing by,' came a voice faintly in the distance.

Randall turned in surprise, the painted cross smearing beneath his feet. The entire blast team, leader included, were cowering behind their truck a hundred yards away with their fingers in their ears.

'There's confidence for you,' Killoran said, and Randall remembered the wide view covered by the screens. Impatiently he raised his arm and, after a second, dropped it.

Nothing happened.

'What's the matter?' Randall shouted.

The team leader stood up and waved his detonating transmitter. 'Seems to be a fault,' he called. 'I'll just have to ...'

Whatever it was, he'd done it, for there was a muffled crack and Central broke open as if it were hard cake icing. A neat circle detached and dropped, shaking the concrete and leaving a raw black hole. When the brief smoke cleared Randall was gone, leaving only a trail of fading painted footprints.

'I told him it would be all right,' the team leader said to his

men as they nervously emerged. 'Didn't I tell him?'

The cell on Randall's shoulder felt the light slipping away and warmed up to compensate, charging the lamp at his hip. The passage angled before him as he ran, its further reaches

concealed beyond the curve.

Five steps at the end of the corridor led into the old foyer. It was a cavern of a chamber, walled by dusty glass on one side. Through it Randall could see the rough inner surface of the concrete wall. This was why the sonics had shown extra thickness here; the concrete skirt on the base of the dome covered the original exterior. The floor was black marble in jointed sections, and similar marble pillars supported the roof. At the far end he could see steps and the entrance to another corridor, and next to them was a windowless doorway and a reception desk. As he crossed to them he described the scene to Killoran, and added, 'I'm expecting the elevator to be somewhere close.'

There was a hurried conversation away from the micro-

phone. 'Mr. Digby says the elevator's probably under direct computer control. Try to find the stairs if you can.'

'All right, but I think he's wrong.' Randall dragged his foot along the floor and saw the sooty shine beneath the dust. There were no other tracks of any kind in the foyer. 'The machine doesn't seem to use this area at all, so there's a chance it hasn't been altered. I'll check the archway.'

There was a fair-size painting behind the reception desk, but the frame had warped and a layer of fungus covered the details. Below and to either side of the steps were two low barrels covered with the same white mildew, the palm trees long digested. The dust was gritty and slippery, like coarse graphite.

Through the arch a staircase led up to a small half-landing, then it doubled back on itself and carried on up out of sight. Randall followed it up to the third flight, and then

stopped.

'What's the matter?' Killoran asked.

'The staircase is blocked.' On either side the wall had been carefully removed, and a sealed tunnel had been driven right across, filling the stairwell completely. It was the first sign of non-human activity he had seen, and he didn't like the uneasy feeling it gave him. The tunnel seemed to come from nowhere and to lead nowhere, but regardless of that it still made further ascent by this route impossible. 'I'll go back and take another look at the elevator.'

'Mr. Digby says perhaps you should try to find another staircase.'

'I didn't see any other exit from the foyer. I want to check all the possibilities before I think about retracing the way.'

The windowless doorway that he had noted as he passed, carried next to it a square panel with a single button in the middle. He touched it more in hope than expectation, and the blank door split down the middle with the two halves sliding back into the wall.

'I've found it,' he said, stepping inside. 'There's been no work done in here. If there's still power getting to the motor it may be able to take me all the way up.' There were five

buttons with an unknown symbol next to each, and he touched the highest of them.

The outer and inner doors slid closed at the same time, and the elevator jerked into a slow climb.

'Be sure you don't let yourself be trapped.'

'If the motor gives out there are plenty of mechanical failsafes on these things. If it comes to the worst I can unscrew the access panel in the ceiling and get out that way.'

There was no way of telling the speed of ascent, for the indicator board over the door was dead. His earpiece buzzed with static as the motor above pulled against the counterweight for the first time in many years.

'Of course,' Killoran said, 'We can't be sure that Central hasn't interferred with the lifting gear at the top. Why

would it bother with alterations inside?'

'Damn, you're right. I didn't think of that. But on the other hand, it did respond to manual operation. I can't tell for sure how fast, but it's definitely moving.'

Distant whispers, and then; 'Probably the motor lubricants have dried out. Digby thinks it could seize or burn.'

Randall had to ask him to repeat because of the worsening signal. Killoran did so, and added, 'It's pretty bad at this end, too.'

'I could put up with it, but I'm getting the noise from the motor outside in the shaft as well.'

'Be careful. We're monitoring another big power drain.'

Static and whistle became a loud whine as the car jerked to a halt and a buzzer in the operation panel began to sound a regular note. He tapped all the buttoms without response, and then said, 'I'm stuck between floors. The motor must have burned, like you said. I'll have to take out the panel.'

'Can't you force the doors?'

Randall tried, but the safety lock held them together. 'No good,' he said, and turned his attention to the panel above. Four stiff butterfly bolts fastened it at the corners, and he used the handle of the blaster as an impromptu hammer to bang them free. The panel dropped as the last bolt came away, and was heavier than he expected; it slid from his grip

and shook the whole car as it hit the floor. The whine from outside was much louder, and the shaft was alive with searing blue flashes.

Sparks from above poured on to his head and shoulders as he struggled to get out on to the car. The smell of burning cloth and hair made a useful if unwelcome contribution to the effort. As soon as he was out he moved to the side of the shaft and pressed himself against the wall away from the

immediate danger.

The top of the car was braced with two girders which served as the mount for an arrangement of wheels and pulleys which were caked with hard grease. The car itself was suspended by a cable through these pulleys and centred in the shaft by two pairs of rails on opposite sides; the cable returned from above down the opposite wall and disappeared below to the counterweight.

He was, indeed, between floors, for a narrow strip of outside door showed above the roof of the car. Even if he could get it open he wouldn't be able to squeeze through it, so he would have to climb the angled bracing of the shaft structure. That meant climbing towards the burning motor, but the arrangement of struts was such that he would be able to

use them as an oversized ladder.

'I'm on top of the car, Neil,' he shouted. He could barely hear himself and the reply was far too dim to make out. 'Say again,' he shouted, and then failed to listen as he saw that the suspending cable was beginning to quiver.

The floor dropped from under him, and he met it again a second later and two feet lower. His knees were bruised as he

fell heavily.

'What the hell was that?' demanded the tiny speaker in his ear.

'Everything's breaking free up top. I'm getting off while there's something to hold on to.'

'Digby says the computer must have spotted you early. It's pouring power into the motor to melt the cable and drop the car down the shaft.'

'Can it do that? Won't the car brake automatically?'

'We don't know. The fail-safes might be either bypassed or suppressed, but if Central thinks it can do it that should be all the confirmation we need. Don't waste any time.'

The rain of molten droplets was leaping and funnelling into the open roof panel, and the composite floor inside began to burn. Randall edged around the torrent and reached for a handhold, but the floor lurched again and his hand closed on empty space.

There was a tearing sound above, and a twisted piece of machine part slammed into the roof next to him, bouncing and falling through the open hatch. He heard a more distant impact as it landed on the floor inside, and the car was shaken again. He wasted no time in stepping across and sliding behind the safety of a cross-girder as the whine became a scream and more shapes of cast metal hurtled down and battered at the car roof. The cable bounced and snapped around and then gave way.

The car accelerated off down the shaft like a speeding train, loose cable snaking behind it. The counterweight thundered upward on the opposite wall as its pulleys unwound, and then it plummeted past again as it followed the car. The roar of descent ended in a crash which sent a cloud of dust and debris shooting back up the shaft, urged on by a second collision as the counterweight ploughed into the wreckage.

The high-speed swirl of detritus came up and around Randall, who tightened his grip on the bar in front of him and closed his eyes to avoid the stinging pain of grit. It picked at his skin and clothes, and he could feel blood run on one cheek, but after a few seconds gravity reasserted its hold on the particles and they fell away.

The corridor had been a dead end, and so they had separated from an agreed point to explore its side-branches. Because of the dome's curve none of them ran straight, and only a full inspection of their length would reveal whether or not they led to the central handling facilities.

Mitchell knew he had found it when he saw the door, removed from its hinges and carefully laid to one side. His hand went to the bag at his side, and his first impulse was to move in immediately and start the disabling process. He could think of a number of good reasons why he should do so, but against them was set Baxter, determinedly exploring dead ends on the other side of the dome.

He had come so far, he deserved not to be excluded. And after all, they had agreed to meet again by the elevator doors whatever the outcome of the search and then proceed together. With reluctance and excited apprehension Mitchell turned and began to retrace the marks he had made along the wall. As he went on he assured himself that there would be no difference whatever he did at this stage; the wall-blowing trick meant fire, and it was a risk Central did not dare to take so close to its functioning centres.

On the empty embankment under the dome, hungry 'crawlers watched and then lost interest as a crescent of light appeared and widened in the roof out over the water. They had seen the process many times before, and it had never yet given them a chance at food. This, in their short-sighted history, was the era of frustration, where appetizing packages of meat repeatedly taunted them and withdrew. Their fine senses, tuned to the hunting significance in the merest shift or attitude in the body of their prey, had analysed the motion of the sturdy workers who occasionally appeared out of reach and had dismissed them as not-food, minerals with only the semblance of animation.

The service robots coupled guiding lines on to the rim of the tube and dropped it towards the water, manipulating the lines to turn its open mouth into the flow under the intense beam of a spotlight cluster. Behind them a heavy-duty water pump shuddered and pulled, and Central's depleted stock of coolant began to come up to pressure.

Mitchell was the first to arrive at the meeting point, but Baxter came limping around a corner only a few moments later. 'I fell in the dark,' he explained. He had been navigating with only the feeble light of Avery Sim's igniter to show the way ahead.

'I think I've found it,' Mitchell told him, and went on to describe the open doorway with the black glass beyond. Baxter eased himself down on to the floor and tentatively

rubbed his leg as he listened.

'You shouldn't have worried about me,' he said when Mitchell had finished. Mitchell was about to reply when he saw Baxter's hand come away from his leg leaving a bright patch behind.

'You're hurt,' Mitchell said, and looked more closely. The leg of the slacks flapped loose for a length of eight or nine inches down the back of Baxter's calf. The edges of material were burnt and sealed as if laid open by a hot razor, and the skin beneath was the same. 'What kind of fall did this?'

'The fall didn't do that, the igniter did. I dropped it when I tripped. I didn't think it was as bad as it seems to be.'

'It should be clean, anyway. What does it feel like?'

'Right now, it's fine. When I walk and the muscle stretches it's hell.'

Their clothes were filthy, and no longer fit to use as bandages. Mitchell said, 'What about the offices? You found an overcoat. I might find something we can use.'

Baxter shuddered and shook his head. 'No thanks. It isn't

as bad as that.'

They settled instead for cutting the edges of cloth back from the open wound; the searing beam of the igniter had closed off blood vessels as it passed, and the little blood that there was had begun to coagulate.

'I heard something going on down below,' Baxter said as

Mitchell laboured to tear the tough fabric.

'What do you mean?'

'Another part of the dome. A kind of distant rumble, and the walls shook. Didn't you hear it?'

'No.'

'I didn't imagine it. It was very distinct. A few minutes later there was another one, not quite as far away. I've an idea what it could be.'

'So have I. Somebody's followed us in and they're getting the same treatment. Fortunately we've a good start on them, and they'll never reach us in time. The chances are that Central will get them first with the new techniques it's learned, and once we've deprogrammed there's no going back.'

'What's to stop them from firing the programme up

again?'

'It would have to be fed in step by step, and nobody can do that. It's taken Central over a hundred years to develop that programme, and it's all held in the electrical stress on the memory liquid underneath us. Cut the power and the molecules scatter.'

'And if they still come after us?'

'We'll worry about that when it happens. Did you see any robots on your way?'

'None. Did you?'

'No, but we'll stay alert anyway. We're not home yet.' Mitchell screwed up the remnant of cloth and threw it to one side.

'I can't see Central letting us in without a fight,' Baxter

said doubtfully.

'Like it said, it's blind and its hands are tied. If it had the full use of its defences we'd never have gone farther than the door.'

Baxter was happy to concede the point. He held out his hand for Mitchell to help him up.

There was comparative peace in the shaft as the dust settled, but Randall's ears were ringing. The protests of heated metal had been replaced by a steady drip of water down one wall from an unseen leak. He inadvertently reached through the falling drops and withdrew his hand sharply; they were

hot, almost boiling.

Outside in the command centre Killoran heard a muttered exclamation and responded immediately, opening his microphone fader.

'Can you hear me?' he said. 'Are you all right?'

'Just about,' Randall's voice came back. 'Everything fell away from under me. I'm hanging on to the side, not too far from the top level. I'll climb the rigging and get out through the doors.'

'I've been trying to reach you. You weren't answering.'

There was badly-suppressed irritation in Randall's reply. 'If you'll forgive me, I had reason to be preoccupied. Besides which I couldn't hear anything over the noise here. I'm going to . . .' There was a dull and distant thud, and the level of background static seemed to increase. Noise limiters cut in, and Randall's voice became softer and less distinct.

'That was something on the other side of the wall. It may have been intended for me, and if that's the case I'm not

waiting to find out what.'

Randall began to haul himself upwards over the girders, reminding himself of the jungle gym at the baby farm. Although he was comparatively fit he was also reminded of the inadequate pulling strength of his arms and became conscious of the inelegance with which he had to drag himself on to his belly on the next highest cross-piece and scramble to bring his legs up. After four such exercises he stopped to regain his breath and directed his light upward.

The top-level doors were only a little way above on the adjacent side. Beyond them the shadows of the gear at the top of the shaft were hung with stalactites of solidified metal

and shrouded in steam.

After a short progress report he moved up to the doors and transferred over to their side. The footing here was less secure and most of his weight was out over the drop so that only the grip of his hands prevented him from falling backwards.

There was no obvious way of opening the doors; no safety

handle, no emergency switch. When he risked freeing one hand to attempt to prise them apart he found that they were locked solid.

Randall was on a nine-inch ledge and clinging to the bracing irons of the door frame. Above him was a suspended junkyard, below were four floors of precisely walled-in nothing. And the bloody doors wouldn't open, he added to complete the picture.

'Got a problem, chief?' Killoran asked tentatively.

You might say so,' Randall replied bitterly. 'What does Digby know about elevator doors?'

There was an off-microphone conference. 'He says not

much,' Killoran came back, 'but I'll put him on.'

There was more activity, and then Digby's voice came. He was leaning too close to the microphone and raising his voice unnecessarily.

'It's me, Mr. Randall,' he said. 'Have a look on the housing around the doors. See if you can find some sort of lever or wheel mechanism.'

Randall turned his body as far as he was able in order to direct the beam. The doorframe was surrounded by clusters of cables and junction boxes, and he began to describe them.

'No, you're looking for a lever,' Digby interrupted. 'It's one of those mechanical failsafe devices you were talking about before. The reason why the door won't open is that there's no car there to disengage the lock, so you'll have to do it manually.'

He saw it then, a sprung arm ending in a rubber wheel which projected from behind one of the guide rails. The top of an ascending car would raise it against the spring a few inches and disengage the deadlock on the outer doors. 'I think I've got it,' he reported, and then described the device.

'That sounds right. Try to lift it.'

First he had to reach it. He transferred back to the girderframe and moved up a couple of feet so that he wouldn't have to stretch too far and risk overbalancing. Even so he could only get his fingertips to the wheel, and it felt very solid. There was no give at all as he tried to press upwards, although his arm quivered with the effort.

'No good,' he told Digby. 'I can't get the leverage. It

won't move at all.'

'I don't know what else I can suggest,' Digby said. 'It's not my field, really.'

'Don't worry about it. I'll see if I can shoot the lever

off.'

Killoran came on the line, his voice urgent. 'Don't forget

you've only got six charges.'

"They're no good to me in here, are they? And the longer I stay in one place the less chance I've got of escaping Central's notice."

The blaster was a good, balanced fit in his citizen's hand. The weapons were powerful but inaccurate sidearms due to their fierce recoil, and as such were not standard issue, but he'd had his quota of practice on the Elité's ranges. The long-range hunting version had a damping mechanism which held the barrel level as the charge left it, but to have carried one of those monstrosities into Central would have been out of the question.

He flicked the safety switch into 'prime' mode, and waited a few seconds as a red light glowed. When it went out the weapon was live, and Randall wrapped his arm around the guide rail to absorb the recoil and then sighted on the centre

of the lever.

Even at that range, he missed. His arm came up and away too soon, and the charge spent itself harmlessly in the brickwork and sent a bucketful of powder back over his head. The next shot hit, but off-centre. The lever bent and twisted, but in that way it only became more difficult to move. Randall gave it some time to cool, and reached over to see if he might have done any good. His fingertips flailed at the air a couple of inches short.

If the blaster shot so wide so close, what chance would he have with three running targets? That was, of course, assuming that the next charge freed the doors and left him with one shot per man. Damn Elité bureaucracy! If he'd

co-operated fully he'd still be fighting with an oversized

paper tag danging from the handle.

He sighted again, this time reaching around the guide rail and holding his gun arm to steady it. He triggered the weapon, and the joints in his arm seemed to grind together from the recoil as the plug of charged particles sped from the barrel and buried their energy in the metal rod only two feet away.

It burst apart along the lines of stress determined by the previous impact, and the entire mechanism fell away and rattled off down the shaft. The spring was left hanging loose, so that Randall had either disengaged the doors or sealed them together completely. He de-primed and replaced the blaster on his belt, and then made his way back to the narrow ledge. Balancing himself with one hand he tried with the other to prise the doors apart at the point where their surfaces curved slightly and met.

Too hard, and his fingernails scraped and tore on the metal as they skidded across. This time he used a more gentle pressure, and felt the springs reluctantly begin to give; then there was a crack enough to reached his hand into, and his arm was through before the double doors could ease together again. A hard thrust of his shoulder and they both retracted fully whilst his momentum carried him on

and out into the top-level corridor.

Behind him the doors closed soundlessly. He was in a corridor strewn with rubble and filled with steam, and it reflected his glow like a fog. Randall realized that Killoran was talking to him, and began to answer. His assistant seemed not to hear, and Randall put his hand to his collar microphone to find that its connecting lead had been pulled loose. He found the dangling plug and inserted it into the small socket stitched into the shoulder padding. Then he answered again.

'What's happening up there?' Killoran said as soon as he realized that Randall was back in communication. 'We

heard two shots and then lost the signal altogether.'

'Loose wire. I'm as high as I can go, and the place is a

mess. Half the ceiling's come down and the plumbing's ruptured.'

'Mitchell's work?'

'I don't see how. You want to see it up here. More likely it's Central's work as part of the reprogramming; anybody standing underneath when the roof fell in wouldn't have much of a chance.'

'Keep us informed.'

Randall was about to protest, then realized that a delay now for his own comfort was out of the question. The raiding party were somewhere near, and this wasn't the time for recuperation. Suppressing the giddiness of relief, he arose

and stepped over the rubble into the fog.

He tripped within seconds, and as he fell his outstretched hand carried his full weight on to something soft and warm. There was a terrifying, inhuman groan, and Randall withdrew his hand immediately; then, more tentatively, he reached out and probed amongst the dust and swirling vapour.

It was a body, and a few seconds' investigation showed it to be no longer alive. Randall had driven the air from its dead lungs and given it a momentary semblance of animation. He turned it over with difficulty and brushed the sticky paste of plaster dust and condensation off its features. He could tell it was a citizen, but was it Mitchell?

No. There were close similarities shared between all citizens and they became exaggerated in death, but as Randall lifted the head towards his beam he knew that it wasn't the face he'd studied and searched for since the disastrous Grade

Two so long ago.

It must be Baxter, then. He let the head with its half-open eyes drop back, and his hand came away purple and wet. He hardly noticed, wiping the mess absently on his jacket as he studied the dusty floor for footprints. The steam swirled and cleared a little and he shook drops of dew from his eyebrows. His clothes were sticky with the heat and humidity.

Only one trail led away, with no sign of the third man. Central had so far scored two out of four, but time was now short; unclipping the blaster again, Randall stepped over the

dead man and followed the footprints.

They petered out after a few yards, and he was left only with a general direction. Feeling the growing desperation of a rat in a maze as the scent of comfort grows ever fainter he began to check the corridors which angled away. At first he gave each little more than a glance, but as the blind alleys and wrong turnings accumulated he found that he had to return to look again and be sure. Randall knew that he had to follow a general direction inward from the curve of the main passage but had no other guide: and all these passageways looked the same. He couldn't be sure that he wasn't wandering through the same ones over and over again.

Only the main corridor was recognizable, being wider than the others and having no abrupt turns in its gentle sweep. He would have to adopt some kind of system of search, and use this as his main reference point. Only when he came to scrape a mark on the next corner did he realize

that somebody else had used the same idea.

It was a numeral, barely legible, and it had been struck out with a cross. The next junction was the same, and the next one after that. Two more and – but an uneasy thought sent him back to the last symbol to look again.

What he had hastily read as a striking-out was no such thing. It was a crude line dragged under the numeral, and an

exclamation mark after it.

Mitchell and Baxter had been searching separately. One or the other found success, and they had met again in the corridor near the elevator, where Central had waited and managed to swat one of them. The fate of the third man was as obscure as his origins, but only Mitchell was ahead now.

At the sight of the unhooked door and the open area beyond Randall paused to douse the beam that would betray

his presence.

'I've arrived, Neil,' he reported in a whisper. 'Don't transmit to me in case Mitchell hears anything – overspill from the earpiece or something like that.'

'Shouldn't be any danger of it, but I'll keep the fader

down at this end anyway. I don't want to distract you.'

Randall's eyes adjusted to the overall glow that seeped into the corridor, and after a moment he stepped through the open doorway.

It was quiet, most unlike the raucous computer room in the Elité building. This was indeed the apex of the dome, for its top curved overhead, the broken planes of panelling seen through a bracing framework. He was screened from the rest of the circular chamber by a series of wedges of electronics banks taller and wider than himself, stacked in rows and separated by narrow avenues all of which arrowed in towards the chamber's centre.

There was a rustle, and then the definite sound of metal against metal somewhere over towards that centre. Randall slipped sideways into the nearest avenue and edged silently down it.

Mitchell crouched by the operator's console, a fixed semicircular desk which was surfaced with an array of coloured lights and three prominent keys. He was reaching into a small pouch, and withdrew an object that Randall recognized. It was the right-handed partner to the insulated glove found in the underbelly.

He pulled it on and worked his fingers into it as he crossed to the inner curve of panelling on the electronics banks opposite Randall. The panels hinged open easily, and revealed nothing of much wonder or surprise; ordered stacks of silvery printed wafers, hundreds of them edge-on. Wire and glass linked and cross linked the circuity.

Randall knew he should move, but was fascinated. His own private fantasies of destruction were fighting to surface under this vicarious stimulation, and the guilty struggle to hold them down was eating away the edges of his resolve.

But Mitchell reached out with the glove, and that was it. Randall stepped from his hiding-place and swung the blaster up to shoulder height, steadying his wrist and bracing his legs in combat stance.

'Mitchell!' he barked. The gloved hand froze, and then

hovered. Mitchell didn't turn round. 'There's a gun on you.

Step away from that panel or I'll fire.'

He turned then, wide-eyed and uncomprehending. His skin, hair and clothes were clogged with white dust and flecked with Baxter's blood. He saw Randall, a complete contrast in the soot and grease of the elevator shaft with a smear of half-dried gore down one side of his jacket, and also saw the truth of his threat in the unwavering barrel of the blaster. Mitchell couldn't think of anything to say.

'Just move away from the panel,' Randall repeated.

All around them the clean song of the machine continued. It wasn't true. He could come so far and then fail. The panel was open, his hand only inches from it.

'Don't bother. You'd barely touch it.'

That was true. The most he would be able to do before dying would be to give Central a mild headache. He dropped his hand regretfully, but didn't move away.

'I was a fool,' he said sadly. 'I didn't think you could be here so soon. I wasted time and tried to make a drama out of it; I should have killed the programme straight away.'

'That's the first thing you've done right. Now get away from that panel.' Randall was gripping the blaster too hard, and his aim wavered slightly. Mitchell saw the movement.

'I haven't come this far to be led back again,' he said. 'You won't use that.'

'Three of our people are dead because of you.'

'And two of my friends are dead because of ... this!' He gestured around him with his ungloved hand. The soft and vulnerable parts of Central Command ticked on without concern. 'You're standing in the middle of the most sophisticated killing machine ever devised!'

Randall wanted to shout I know, I understand, but this

isn't the way to change it. 'That's ridiculous,' he said.

'Is it? Then go out into the streets and watch the dead men going past. Living's too much of a pain, give them tapes and TV instead, give them anything but don't ask them to care. Is that what you're protecting?' 'Away from the panel!'

'Kill me first!' The gloved fist came up and around and into the open chest of the unit. With a soft whoosh a million bits flooded out and enveloped him in a glittering cloud.

The explosion was over in a second, and Mitchell was an

inert form on the ground. Randall lowered the blaster.

'Did you get him, chief?' Killoran asked anxiously in his ear.

'No. I didn't even pull the trigger.'

'What happened, then?'

'I don't know. It looks like he touched something off and started an overload. Monitor all the services, will you?'

A few seconds, and then; 'Everything reads normal.'

Did he really believe his own explanation? Wary of deception he moved over to where Mitchell lay. Far-flung particles crunched underfoot.

Had Central been listening, and had it not trusted his aim? He found it hard to believe that the machine would sacrifice part of its irreplaceable self simply to stop a conversation between them. And yet as the moment replayed itself in his mind he saw with distinct clarity that the open unit had blown out before Mitchell's glove had even made contact.

Keep the gun,' Killoran was saying. 'Make sure he's dead.'
As Randall stooped he hooked the blaster back on to his
belt and then reached for his shoulder. He jerked the microphone contact out of its socket and turned Mitchell over.

Mitchell grunted as he rolled on to his back, and blinked up at Randall. His skin and clothing were peppered with hundreds of small cuts and tears, but Randall couldn't see any obvious serious injury. His hand strayed to rest on the blaster, but Mitchell didn't move to get up.

'Picked the wrong panel, didn't I?' he said with an effort at a smile. Then he coughed, and a trickle of fresh-looking

blood ran over his lower lip and onto his chin.

Randall lifted his shoulders and sat him upright against one of the circuit banks. Mitchell screwed his face up with the pain of the operation but then said, 'Thanks. That's better.' Those cuts were more than just surface damage; some of them were entry holes. Randall said, 'You're bleeding inside. I don't think there's anything I can do for you.'

'There's one thing.' Randall followed the direction of Mitchell's eyes. He was looking at the three keys on the oper-

ator's console.

'I can't do that.'

'Why not? In your job ... you must have seen it all. You

must know what's going on.'

'Of course I know what's going on. Anybody with half a mind could work it out from the evidence, but that's just something I have to live with. Central may be lousy, but it's the only system we've got. Kick the pins out and we're back in the stone age.'

Mitchell started to shake his head, and then changed his

mind. 'You're wrong,' he said. 'There's the fail safe.'

'What's that?'

'Small item of information, courtesy of the archives. It's the reason why Central Command was so enthusiastic about having me dead.'

'How do you know about that?'

'The Elité doesn't have exclusive rights on the use of agents. The fail safe is a part of the original programme that Central can't rewrite. When they put this place together they had reservations about the amount of power they were concentrating in one spot, but it was an all-or-nothing project. So they protected themselves – they thought – with the fail safe. Turn those three keys and the governing programme cuts out – nothing else.'

Randall turned to look at the console again, but then turned back quickly, suspecting a trick. Mitchell hadn't

moved.

'Suppose that's true,' Randall said. 'What exactly

happens?'

'All the other services carry on, but they're not co-ordinated. There'll be confusion, but not chaos. A breathing-space while people come to appreciate the need for a new decision-making process.'

'Where will these people come from? The citizens?'

Mitchell's hand raised slightly and then dropped in a contemptuous gesture. 'Hardly,' he said. 'All the guts and enterprise are out in the underbelly. That's where your next government comes from.'

Randall realized with a start that he was half-convinced. He fought the impulse and it subsided. 'That's ridiculous,' he said for the second time. Beguiling, but surely it was ridiculous.

'Why do you think the machine went to such lengths to protect this area? To remove all traces of its origins? It's not just a machine. It thinks it's a life form! It's prepared to preserve itself at our expense. We're nothing to it, any more than points on a graph! Those are the exact terms it uses when it thinks of us!'

'And it breeds us to suit its statistics. I know all that.'

'Then you won't leave alive. Turn the keys now before it

thinks of another way to get to us.'

Mitchell's eyes fixed, pleading, on his own. Randall started to say something, and then stopped; he had shifted position slightly but Mitchell's eyes had not, and now they stared over his shoulder. Randall waved a hand before them but there was no flicker of response.

He straightened up and reconnected the microphone

'Mitchell's dead, Neil,' he said.

'Well done. We lost you again for a while.'

'I know. Accident.' Aware that he was avoiding looking directly at the operator's console, Randall stepped over Mitchell's legs and crossed to where the belt-pouch lay open on

the floor. Central hummed gently on all sides.

First to come out of the pouch were three crudely-shaped probes and 'drivers. The tip of one of them was burnt blue, and Randall dropped them on one side. Next was a pocket-sized book with yellowing paper and not much print. It joined the probes. The only other object was a plain wooden box with a hinged lid.

Randall opened it carefully, expecting to find explosives.

As the lid came open he heard a lurch of clockwork mechanism and the starting whirr of a motor – the damn thing was a booby-tap! He threw it away from him and dived behind the console.

It bounced once, twice, and Randall covered his head with his arms. The box rolled and came to a stop with its lid open, and the motor continued to turn.

Randall unfroze, and pushed himself sheepishly to his knees. Then he stood up and went round the console to

where the musical box was playing.

'What's going on now?' The microphone was picking up the signal. After a few bars the tune began to repeat.

'Nothing,' Randall said, and disconnected the microphone lead.

Collinson was twiddling the tuning dial on his ancient receiver when a light began to flash on his switchboard. Mumbling to himself in irritation he turned off the power and went over to answer the call.

'What is it?' he demanded, making no effort to conceal his mood.

He recognized the replying voice immediately; Greenbaum, old man on the fourth floor. He rarely came out and almost never made requests, but now he was saying, 'It's my public broadcast speaker. I wonder if you could have a look at it for me?'

'I don't know. I've got a lot on.' If pressed for a justification, no doubt Collinson would think of something.

'When you've finished, then? I don't want to be any trouble.'

'All right, when I've finished.'

Collinson hung up and returned to his receiver. With the power on everything seemed to be working, but the wavebands just hissed with static. He would have to have it repaired, and then find some way of losing the bill in the apartment block's accounts.

He switched the set off in disgust, and dropped into his armchair. It wheezed as air bled out of all its seams under his weight, but he couldn't feel comfortable; the silence in the glassed-in office disturbed him. Outside, the building's lobby was quiet, but the faint and random sounds of the street beyond drifted in and settled like dust around him.

With a sigh of irritation he opened a drawer and took out a sheaf of official requisition forms and billings for citizens' property from Central Command. He stuffed them untidily under the sprung jaws on his clipboard and went out to

summon the elevator.

It rumbled down from the fifth floor. Collinson feigned an amiable greeting to the citizen woman that emerged, and then pulled the double doors closed behind him and pressed the fourth floor button. The recently-repaired mechanism jerked a couple of times and then began to haul the car upwards.

Greenbaum followed him from the door and watched anxiously as he looked over the set. Collinson was aware that he had no technical knowledge or ability, but Greenbaum didn't know that, and so he turned all the dials and altered all the settings and nodded knowingly at each result. In the end he gave his verdict.

'It's not working,' he said.

'It's not switched on,' Greenbaum pointed out.

'I know that,' Collinson said quickly. 'These are tests we do before it's switched on. You can learn a lot that way.'

Greenbaum seemed suitably impressed, and Collinson tried again with the power on. After a few seconds he paused, uncertain; the set's speaker was hissing with the same formless static as his own.

'It went off suddenly, about ten minutes ago,' Greenbaum said.

Four floors below, the switchboard in Collinson's office had lit up like a Christmas tree.

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