

THE MACK REYNOLDS MEGAPACK®



23 *Classic Science
Fiction Stories*

Table of Contents

[The Mack Reynolds MEGAPACK®](#)

[COPYRIGHT INFO](#)

[A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER](#)

[HAPPY ENDING](#)

[ULTIMA THULE](#)

[GUN FOR HIRE](#)

[ADAPTATION](#)

[STOWAWAY](#)

[MEDAL OF HONOR](#)

[I'M A STRANGER HERE MYSELF](#)

[STATUS QUO](#)

[UNBORN TOMORROW](#)

[SUMMIT](#)

[FREEDOM](#)

[DOGFIGHT—1973](#)

[THE COMMON MAN](#)

[COMBAT](#)

[REVOLUTION](#)

[BLACK MAN'S BURDEN](#)

[SUBVERSIVE](#)

OFF COURSE

POTENTIAL ENEMY

BORDER, BREED NOR BIRTH

MERCENARY

FRIGID FRACAS

EXPEDITER

THE MEGAPACK SERIES

The Mack Reynolds MEGAPACK®

Version 1.3

COPYRIGHT INFO

The Mack Reynolds Megapack is copyright © 2013 by Wildside Press LLC. All rights reserved. Cover art copyright © 2013 by Kovalenko Inna / Fotolia. For more information, contact the publisher.

Version 1.0.

* * * *

“Happy Ending,” by Mack Reynolds and Fredric Brown, originally appeared in *Fantastic Universe*, September 1957.

“Ultima Thule” originally appeared in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, March 1961.

“Gun for Hire” originally appeared in *Analog*, December 1960.

“Adaptation” originally appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, August 1960.

“Stowaway” originally appeared in *Universe Science Fiction*, June 1953.

“Medal of Honor” originally appeared in *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*, November 1960.

“I’m a Stranger Here Myself” originally appeared in *Amazing Stories*, December 1960.

“Status Quo” originally appeared in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, August 1961.

“Unborn Tomorrow” originally appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, June 1959.

“Summit” originally appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, February, 1960.

“Freedom” originally appeared in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, February 1961.

“Dogfight—1973” originally appeared in *Imagination Stories of Science and Fantasy*, July 1953.

“The Common Man” originally appeared in *Analog*, January 1963.

“Combat” originally appeared in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, October 1960.

“Black Man’s Burden” originally appeared as a 2-part serial in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, December 1961 and January 1962.

“Subversive” originally appeared in *Analog*, December 1962.

“Off Course” originally appeared in *If Worlds of Science Fiction*, January 1954.

“Revolution” originally appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, May 1960.

“Potential Enemy” originally appeared in *Orbit*, Vol. 1 No, 2, 1953.

“Border, Breed Nor Birth” originally appeared in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, July 1962.

“Mercenary” originally appeared in *Analog*, April 1962.

“Frigid Fracas” originally appeared as a 2-part serial in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, March and April 1963.

“Expediter” originally appeared in *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*, May 1963.

A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

I grew up reading Mack Reynolds' work, primarily in *Analog* magazine. He was one of editor John W. Campbell's regular contributors, and while he never rose to the fame of such other Campbell-era authors as (say) Isaac Asimov or Robert A. Heinlein, he nevertheless had a long and distinguished career in the field.

His entry in Wikipedia says:

Dallas McCord "Mack" Reynolds (November 11, 1917 – January 30, 1983) was an American science fiction writer. His pen names included Dallas Ross, Mark Mallory, Clark Collins, Dallas Rose, Guy McCord, Maxine Reynolds, Bob Belmont, and Todd Harding. His work is noteworthy for its focus on socioeconomic speculation, usually expressed in thought-provoking explorations of Utopian societies from a radical, sometime satiric, perspective. He was a considerably popular author from the 1950s to the 1970s, especially with readers of science fiction and fantasy magazines.

If you've gotten as far as this brief editorial note, you're no doubt impatient to begin. So please feel free to jump ahead to the stories; they speak for themselves.

Enjoy!

—John Betancourt
Publisher, Wildside Press LLC
wildsidepress.com | bcmystery.com

ABOUT THE MEGAPACK SERIES

Over the last few years, our “Megapack” series of ebook anthologies has proved to be one of our most popular endeavors. (Maybe it helps that we sometimes offer them as premiums to our mailing list!) One question we keep getting asked is, “Who’s the editor?”

The Megapacks (except where specifically credited) are a group effort. Everyone at Wildside works on them. This includes John Betancourt, Carla Coupe, Steve Coupe, Bonner Menking, Colin Azariah-Kribbs, A.E. Warren, and many of Wildside’s authors...who often suggest stories to include (and not just their own!).

RECOMMEND A FAVORITE STORY?

Do you know a great classic science fiction story, or have a favorite author whom you believe is perfect for the Megapack series? We’d love your suggestions! You can post them on our message board at <http://movies.ning.com/forum> (there is an area for Wildside Press comments).

Note: we only consider stories that have already been professionally published. This is not a market for new works.

TYPOS

Unfortunately, as hard as we try, a few typos do slip through. We update our ebooks periodically, so make sure you have the current version (or download a fresh copy if it's been sitting in your ebook reader for months.) It may have already been updated.

If you spot a new typo, please let us know. We'll fix it for everyone. You can email the publisher at wildsidepress@yahoo.com or use the message boards above.

HAPPY ENDING

Written in collaboration with Fredric Brown

There were four men in the lifeboat that came down from the space-cruiser. Three of them were still in the uniform of the Galactic Guards.

The fourth sat in the prow of the small craft looking down at their goal, hunched and silent, bundled up in a greatcoat against the coolness of space—a greatcoat which he would never need again after this morning. The brim of his hat was pulled down far over his forehead, and he studied the nearing shore through dark-lensed glasses. Bandages, as though for a broken jaw, covered most of the lower part of his face.

He realized suddenly that the dark glasses, now that they had left the cruiser, were unnecessary. He slipped them off. After the cinematographic grays his eyes had seen through these lenses for so long, the brilliance of the color below him was almost like a blow. He blinked, and looked again.

They were rapidly settling toward a shoreline, a beach. The sand was a dazzling, unbelievable white such as had never been on his home planet. Blue the sky and water, and green the edge of the fantastic jungle. There was a flash of red in the green, as they came still closer, and he realized suddenly that it must be a

marigee, the semi-intelligent Venusian parrot once so popular as pets throughout the solar system.

Throughout the system blood and steel had fallen from the sky and ravished the planets, but now it fell no more.

And now this. Here in this forgotten portion of an almost completely destroyed world it had not fallen at all.

Only in some place like this, alone, was safety for him. Elsewhere—anywhere—imprisonment or, more likely, death. There was danger, even here. Three of the crew of the space-cruiser knew. Perhaps, someday, one of them would talk. Then they would come for him, even here.

But that was a chance he could not avoid. Nor were the odds bad, for three people out of a whole solar system knew where he was. And those three were loyal fools.

The lifeboat came gently to rest. The hatch swung open and he stepped out and walked a few paces up the beach. He turned and waited while the two spacemen who had guided the craft brought his chest out and carried it across the beach and to the corrugated-tin shack just at the edge of the trees. That shack had once been a space-radar relay station. Now the equipment it had held was long gone, the antenna mast taken down. But the shack still stood. It would be his home for a while. A long while. The two men returned to the lifeboat preparatory to leaving.

And now the captain stood facing him, and the captain's face was a rigid mask. It seemed with an effort that the captain's right arm remained at his side, but that effort had been ordered. No salute.

The captain's voice, too, was rigid with unemotion. "Number One ..."

“Silence!” And then, less bitterly. “Come further from the boat before you again let your tongue run loose. Here.” They had reached the shack.

“You are right, Number ...”

“No. I am no longer Number One. You must continue to think of me as *Mister* Smith, your cousin, whom you brought here for the reasons you explained to the under-officers, before you surrender your ship. If you *think* of me so, you will be less likely to slip in your speech.”

“There is nothing further I can do—Mister Smith?”

“Nothing. Go now.”

“And I am ordered to surrender the—”

“There are no orders. The war is over, lost. I would suggest thought as to what spaceport you put into. In some you may receive humane treatment. In others—”

The captain nodded. “In others, there is great hatred. Yes. That is all?”

“That is all. And, Captain, your running of the blockade, your securing of fuel *en route*, have constituted a deed of high valor. All I can give you in reward is my thanks. But now go. Goodbye.”

“Not goodbye,” the captain blurted impulsively, “but *hasta la vista, auf Wiedersehen, until the day...* you will permit me, for the last time to address you and salute?”

The man in the greatcoat shrugged. “As you will.”

Click of heels and a salute that once greeted the Caesars, and later the pseudo-Aryan of the 20th Century, and, but yesterday, he who was now known as *the last of the dictators*. “Farewell, Number One!”

“Farewell,” he answered emotionlessly.

Mr. Smith, a black dot on the dazzling white sand, watched the lifeboat disappear up into the blue, finally into the haze of the upper atmosphere of Venus. That eternal haze that would always be there to mock his failure and his bitter solitude.

The slow days snarled by, and the sun shone dimly, and the *marigees* screamed in the early dawn and all day and at sunset, and sometimes there were the six-legged *baroons*, monkey-like in the trees, that gibbered at him. And the rains came and went away again.

At nights there were drums in the distance. Not the martial roll of marching, nor yet a threatening note of savage hate. Just drums, many miles away, throbbing rhythm for native dances or exorcising, perhaps, the forest-night demons. He assumed these Venusians had their superstitions, all other races had. There was no threat, for him, in that throbbing that was like the beating of the jungle's heart.

Mr. Smith knew that, for although his choice of destinations had been a hasty choice, yet there had been time for him to read the available reports. The natives were harmless and friendly. A Terran missionary had lived among them some time ago—before the outbreak of the war. They were a simple, weak race. They seldom went far from their villages; the space-radar operator who had once occupied the shack reported that he had never seen one of them.

So, there would be no difficulty in avoiding the natives, nor danger if he did encounter them.

Nothing to worry about, except the bitterness.

Not the bitterness of regret, but of defeat. Defeat at the hands of the defeated. The damned Martians who came back

after he had driven them halfway across their damned arid planet. The Jupiter Satellite Confederation landing endlessly on the home planet, sending their vast armadas of spacecraft daily and nightly to turn his mighty cities into dust. In spite of everything; in spite of his score of ultra-vicious secret weapons and the last desperate efforts of his weakened armies, most of whose men were under twenty or over forty.

The treachery even in his own army, among his own generals and admirals. The turn of Luna, that had been the end.

His people would rise again. But not, now after Armageddon, in his lifetime. Not under him, nor another like him. The last of the dictators.

Hated by a solar system, and hating it.

It would have been intolerable, save that he was alone. He had foreseen that—the need for solitude. Alone, he was still Number One. The presence of others would have forced recognition of his miserably changed status. Alone, his pride was undamaged. His ego was intact.

* * * *

The long days, and the *marigees'* screams, the slithering swish of the surf, the ghost-quiet movements of the *baroons* in the trees and the raucousness of their shrill voices. Drums.

Those sounds, and those alone. But perhaps silence would have been worse.

For the times of silence were louder. Times he would pace the beach at night and overhead would be the roar of jets and rockets, the ships that had roared over New Albuquerque, his capitol, in those last days before he had fled. The crump of bombs and the screams and the blood, and the flat voices of his folding generals.

Those were the days when the waves of hatred from the conquered peoples beat upon his country as the waves of a stormy sea beat upon crumbling cliffs. Leagues back of the battered lines, you could *feel* that hate and vengeance as a tangible thing, a thing that thickened the air, that made breathing difficult and talking futile.

And the spacecraft, the jets, the rockets, the damnable rockets, more every day and every night, and ten coming for every one shot down. Rocket ships raining hell from the sky, havoc and chaos and the end of hope.

And then he knew that he had been hearing another sound, hearing it often and long at a time. It was a voice that shouted invective and ranted hatred and glorified the steel might of his planet and the destiny of a man and a people.

It was his own voice, and it beat back the waves from the white shore, it stopped their wet encroachment upon this, his domain. It screamed back at the *baroons* and they were silent. And at times he laughed, and the *marigees* laughed. Sometimes, the queerly shaped Venusian trees talked too, but their voices were quieter. The trees were submissive, they were good subjects.

Sometimes, fantastic thoughts went through his head. The race of trees, the pure race of trees that never interbred, that stood firm always. Someday the trees—

But that was just a dream, a fancy. More real were the *marigees* and the *kifs*. They were the ones who persecuted him. There was the *marigee* who would shriek "*All is lost!*" He had shot at it a hundred times with his needle gun, but always it flew away unharmed. Sometimes it did not even fly away.

"All is lost!"

At last he wasted no more needle darts. He stalked it to strangle it with his bare hands. That was better. On what might have been the thousandth try, he caught it and killed it, and there was warm blood on his hands and feathers were flying.

That should have ended it, but it didn't. Now there were a dozen *marigees* that screamed that all was lost. Perhaps there had been a dozen all along. Now he merely shook his fist at them or threw stones.

The *kifs*, the Venusian equivalent of the Terran ant, stole his food. But that did not matter; there was plenty of food. There had been a cache of it in the shack, meant to restock a space-cruiser, and never used. The *kifs* would not get at it until he opened a can, but then, unless he ate it all at once, they ate whatever he left. That did not matter. There were plenty of cans. And always fresh fruit from the jungle. Always in season, for there were no seasons here, except the rains.

But the *kifs* served a purpose for him. They kept him sane, by giving him something tangible, something inferior, to hate.

Oh, it wasn't hatred, at first. Mere annoyance. He killed them in a routine sort of way at first. But they kept coming back. Always there were *kifs*. In his larder, wherever he did it. In his bed. He sat the legs of the cot in dishes of gasoline, but the *kifs* still got in. Perhaps they dropped from the ceiling, although he never caught them doing it.

They bothered his sleep. He'd feel them running over him, even when he'd spent an hour picking the bed clean of them by the light of the carbide lantern. They scurried with tickling little feet and he could not sleep.

He grew to hate them, and the very misery of his nights made his days more tolerable by giving them an increasing purpose. A pogrom against the *kifs*. He sought out their holes by

patiently following one bearing a bit of food, and he poured gasoline into the hole and the earth around it, taking satisfaction in the thought of the writhings in agony below. He went about hunting *kifs*, to step on them. To stamp them out. He must have killed millions of *kifs*.

But always there were as many left. Never did their number seem to diminish in the slightest. Like the Martians—but unlike the Martians, they did not fight back.

Theirs was the passive resistance of a vast productivity that bred *kifs* ceaselessly, overwhelmingly, billions to replace millions. Individual *kifs* could be killed, and he took savage satisfaction in their killing, but he knew his methods were useless save for the pleasure and the purpose they gave him. Sometimes the pleasure would pall in the shadow of its futility, and he would dream of mechanized means of killing them.

He read carefully what little material there was in his tiny library about the *kif*. They were astonishingly like the ants of Terra. So much that there had been speculation about their relationship—that didn't interest him. How could they be killed, *en masse*? Once a year, for a brief period, they took on the characteristics of the army ants of Terra. They came from their holes in endless numbers and swept everything before them in their devouring march. He wet his lips when he read that. Perhaps the opportunity would come then to destroy, to destroy, *and destroy*.

Almost, Mr. Smith forgot people and the solar system and what had been. Here in this new world, there was only he and the *kifs*. The *baroons* and the *marigees* didn't count. They had no order and no system. The *kifs*—

In the intensity of his hatred there slowly filtered through a grudging admiration. The *kifs* were true totalitarians. They

practiced what he had preached to a mightier race, practiced it with a thoroughness beyond the kind of man to comprehend.

Theirs the complete submergence of the individual to the state, theirs the complete ruthlessness of the true conqueror, the perfect selfless bravery of the true soldier.

But they got into his bed, into his clothes, into his food.

They crawled with intolerable tickling feet.

Nights he walked the beach, and that night was one of the noisy nights. There were high-flying, high-whining jet-craft up there in the moonlight sky and their shadows dappled the black water of the sea. The planes, the rockets, the jet-craft, they were what had ravaged his cities, had turned his railroads into twisted steel, had dropped their H-Bombs on his most vital factories.

He shook his fist at them and shrieked imprecations at the sky.

And when he had ceased shouting, there were voices on the beach. Conrad's voice in his ear, as it had sounded that day when Conrad had walked into the palace, white-faced, and forgotten the salute. "There is a breakthrough at Denver, Number One! Toronto and Monterey are in danger. And in the other hemispheres—" His voice cracked. "—the damned Martians and the traitors from Luna are driving over the Argentine. Others have landed near New Petrograd. It is a rout. All is lost!"

Voices crying, "Number One, *hail!* Number One, *hail!*"

A sea of hysterical voices. "Number One, *hail!* Number One —"

A voice that was louder, higher, more frenetic than any of the others. His memory of his own voice, calculated but inspired, as he'd heard it on play-backs of his own speeches.

The voices of children chanting, "To thee, O Number One —" He couldn't remember the rest of the words, but they had been beautiful words. That had been at the public school meet in the New Los Angeles. How strange that he should remember, here and now, the very tone of his voice and inflection, the shining wonder in their children's eyes. Children only, but they were willing to kill and die, *for him*, convinced that all that was needed to cure the ills of the race was a suitable leader to follow.

"All is lost!"

And suddenly the monster jet-craft were swooping downward and starkly he realized what a clear target he presented, here against the white moonlit beach. They must see him.

The crescendo of motors as he ran, sobbing now in fear, for the cover of the jungle. Into the screening shadow of the giant trees, and the sheltering blackness.

He stumbled and fell, was up and running again. And now his eyes could see in the dimmer moonlight that filtered through the branches overhead. Stirrings there, in the branches. Stirrings and voices in the night. Voices in and of the night. Whispers and shrieks of pain. Yes, he'd shown them pain, and now their tortured voices ran with him through the knee-deep, night-wet grass among the trees.

The night was hideous with noise. Red noises, an almost *tangible* din that he could nearly *feel* as well as he could see and hear it. And after a while his breath came raspingly, and there was a thumping sound that was the beating of his heart and the beating of the night.

And then, he could run no longer, and he clutched a tree to keep from falling, his arms trembling about it, and his face pressed against the impersonal roughness of the bark. There

was no wind, but the tree swayed back and forth and his body with it.

Then, as abruptly as light goes on when a switch is thrown, the noise vanished. Utter silence, and at last he was strong enough to let go his grip on the tree and stand erect again, to look about to get his bearings.

One tree was like another, and for a moment he thought he'd have to stay here until daylight. Then he remembered that the sound of the surf would give him his directions. He listened hard and heard it, faint and far away.

And another sound—one that he had never heard before—faint, also, but seeming to come from his right and quite near.

He looked that way, and there was a patch of opening in the trees above. The grass was waving strangely in that area of moonlight. It moved, although there was no breeze to move it. And there was an almost sudden *edge*, beyond which the blades thinned out quickly to barrenness.

And the sound—it was like the sound of the surf, but it was continuous. It was more like the rustle of dry leaves, but there were no dry leaves to rustle.

Mr. Smith took a step toward the sound and looked down. More grass bent, and fell, and vanished, even as he looked. Beyond the moving edge of devastation was a brown floor of the moving bodies of *kifs*.

Row after row, orderly rank after orderly rank, marching resistlessly onward. Billions of *kifs*, an army of *kifs*, eating their way across the night.

Fascinated, he stared down at them. There was no danger, for their progress was slow. He retreated a step to keep beyond their front rank. The sound, then, was the sound of chewing.

He could see one edge of the column, and it was a neat, orderly edge. And there was discipline, for the ones on the outside were larger than those in the center.

He retreated another step—and then, quite suddenly, his body was afire in several spreading places. The vanguard. Ahead of the rank that ate away the grass.

His boots were brown with *kifs*.

Screaming with pain, he whirled about and ran, beating with his hands at the burning spots on his body. He ran head-on into a tree, bruising his face horribly, and the night was scarlet with pain and shooting fire.

But he staggered on, almost blindly, running, writhing, tearing off his clothes as he ran.

This, then, was *pain*. There was a shrill screaming in his ears that must have been the sound of his own voice.

When he could no longer run, he crawled. Naked, now, and with only a few *kifs* still clinging to him. And the blind tangent of his flight had taken him well out of the path of the advancing army.

But stark fear and the memory of unendurable pain drove him on. His knees raw now, he could no longer crawl. But he got himself erect again on trembling legs, and staggered on. Catching hold of a tree and pushing himself away from it to catch the next.

Falling, rising, falling again. His throat raw from the screaming invective of his hate. Bushes and the rough bark of trees tore his flesh.

* * * *

Into the village compound just before dawn, staggered a man, a naked terrestrial. He looked about with dull eyes that

seemed to see nothing and understand nothing.

The females and young ran before him, even the males retreated.

He stood there, swaying, and the incredulous eyes of the natives widened as they saw the condition of his body, and the blankness of his eyes.

When he made no hostile move, they came closer again, formed a wondering, chattering circle about him, these Venusian humanoids. Some ran to bring the chief and the chief's son, who knew everything.

The mad, naked human opened his lips as though he were going to speak, but instead, he fell. He fell, as a dead man falls. But when they turned him over in the dust, they saw that his chest still rose and fell in labored breathing.

And then came Alwa, the aged chieftain, and Nrana, his son. Alwa gave quick, excited orders. Two of the men carried Mr. Smith into the chief's hut, and the wives of the chief and the chief's son took over the Earthling's care, and rubbed him with a soothing and healing salve.

But for days and nights he lay without moving and without speaking or opening his eyes, and they did not know whether he would live or die.

Then, at last, he opened his eyes. And he talked, although they could make out nothing of the things he said.

Nrana came and listened, for Nrana of all of them spoke and understood best the Earthling's language, for he had been the special protege of the Terran missionary who had lived with them for a while.

Nrana listened, but he shook his head. "The words," he said, "the words are of the Terran tongue, but I make nothing of them. His mind is not well."

The aged Alwa said, "Aie. Stay beside him. Perhaps as his body heals, his words will be beautiful words as were the words of the Father-of-Us who, in the Terran tongue, taught us of the gods and their good."

So they cared for him well, and his wounds healed, and the day came when he opened his eyes and saw the handsome blue-complexioned face of Nrana sitting there beside him, and Nrana said softly, "Good day, Mr. Man of Earth. You feel better, no?"

There was no answer, and the deep-sunken eyes of the man on the sleeping mat stared, glared at him. Nrana could see that those eyes were not yet sane, but he saw, too, that the madness in them was not the same that it had been. Nrana did not know the words for delirium and paranoia, but he could distinguish between them.

No longer was the Earthling a raving maniac, and Nrana made a very common error, an error more civilized beings than he have often made. He thought the paranoia was an improvement over the wider madness. He talked on, hoping the Earthling would talk too, and he did not recognize the danger of his silence.

"We welcome you, Earthling," he said, "and hope that you will live among us, as did the Father-of-Us, Mr. Gerhardt. He taught us to worship the true gods of the high heavens. Jehovah, and Jesus and their prophets the men from the skies. He taught us to pray and to love our enemies."

And Nrana shook his head sadly, "But many of our tribe have gone back to the older gods, the cruel gods. They say there has been great strife among the outsiders, and no more remain upon all of Venus. My father, Alwa, and I are glad another one

has come. You will be able to help those of us who have gone back. You can teach us love and kindness."

The eyes of the dictator closed. Nrana did not know whether or not he slept, but Nrana stood up quietly to leave the hut. In the doorway, he turned and said, "We pray for you."

And then, joyously, he ran out of the village to seek the others, who were gathering bela-berries for the feast of the fourth event.

When, with several of them, he returned to the village, the Earthling was gone. The hut was empty.

Outside the compound they found, at last, the trail of his passing. They followed and it led to a stream and along the stream until they came to the tabu of the green pool, and could go no farther.

"He went downstream," said Alwa gravely. "He sought the sea and the beach. He was well then, in his mind, for he knew that all streams go to the sea."

"Perhaps he had a ship-of-the-sky there at the beach," Nrana said worriedly. "All Earthlings come from the sky. The Father-of-Us told us that."

"Perhaps he will come back to us," said Alwa. His old eyes misted.

* * * *

Mr. Smith was coming back all right, and sooner than they had dared to hope. As soon in fact, as he could make the trip to the shack and return. He came back dressed in clothing very different from the garb the other white man had worn. Shining leather boots and the uniform of the Galactic Guard, and a wide leather belt with a holster for his needle gun.

But the gun was in his hand when, at dusk, he strode into the compound.

He said, "I am Number One, the Lord of all the Solar System, and your ruler. Who was chief among you?"

Alwa had been in his hut, but he heard the words and came out. He understood the words, but not their meaning. He said, "Earthling, we welcome you back. I am the chief."

"You were the chief. Now you will serve me. I am the chief."

Alwa's old eyes were bewildered at the strangeness of this. He said, "I will serve you, yes. All of us. But it is not fitting that an Earthling should be chief among—"

The whisper of the needle gun. Alwa's wrinkled hands went to his scrawny neck where, just off the center, was a sudden tiny pin prick of a hole. A faint trickle of red coursed over the dark blue of his skin. The old man's knees gave way under him as the rage of the poisoned needle dart struck him, and he fell. Others started toward him.

"Back," said Mr. Smith. "Let him die slowly that you may all see what happens to—"

But one of the chief's wives, one who did not understand the speech of Earth, was already lifting Alwa's head. The needle gun whispered again, and she fell forward across him.

"I am Number One," said Mr. Smith, "and Lord of all the planets. All who oppose me, die by—"

And then, suddenly all of them were running toward him. His finger pressed the trigger and four of them died before the avalanche of their bodies bore him down and overwhelmed him. Nrana had been first in that rush, and Nrana died.

The others tied the Earthling up and threw him into one of the huts. And then, while the women began wailing for the dead, the men made council.

They elected Kallana chief and he stood before them and said, "The Father-of-Us, the Mister Gerhardt, deceived us." There was fear and worry in his voice and apprehension on his blue face. "If this be indeed the Lord of whom he told us—"

"He is not a god," said another. "He is an Earthling, but there have been such before on Venus, many many of them who came long and long ago from the skies. Now they are all dead, killed in strife among themselves. It is well. This last one is one of them, but he is mad."

And they talked long and the dusk grew into night while they talked of what they must do. The gleam of firelight upon their bodies, and the waiting drummer.

The problem was difficult. To harm one who was mad was tabu. If he was really a god, it would be worse. Thunder and lightning from the sky would destroy the village. Yet they dared not release him. Even if they took the evil weapon-that-whispered-its-death and buried it, he might find other ways to harm them. He might have another where he had gone for the first.

Yes, it was a difficult problem for them, but the eldest and wisest of them, one M'Ganne, gave them at last the answer.

"O Kallana," he said, "Let us give him to the *kifs*. If *they* harm him—" and old M'Ganne grinned a toothless, mirthless grin "—it would be their doing and not ours."

Kallana shuddered. "It is the most horrible of all deaths. And if he is a god—"

"If he is a god, they will not harm him. If he is mad and not a god, we will not have harmed him. It harms not a man to tie him to a tree."

Kallana considered well, for the safety of his people was at stake. Considering, he remembered how Alwa and Nrana had

died.

He said, "It is right."

The waiting drummer began the rhythm of the council-end, and those of the men who were young and fleet lighted torches in the fire and went out into the forest to seek the *kifs*, who were still in their season of marching.

And after a while, having found what they sought, they returned.

They took the Earthling out with them, then, and tied him to a tree. They left him there, and they left the gag over his lips because they did not wish to hear his screams when the *kifs* came.

The cloth of the gag would be eaten, too, but by that time, there would be no flesh under it from which a scream might come.

They left him, and went back to the compound, and the drums took up the rhythm of propitiation to the gods for what they had done. For they had, they knew, cut very close to the corner of a tabu—but the provocation had been great and they hoped they would not be punished.

All night the drums would throb.

* * * * *

The man tied to the tree struggled with his bonds, but they were strong and his writhings made the knots but tighten.

His eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

He tried to shout, "I am Number One, Lord of—"

And then, because he could not shout and because he could not loosen himself, there came a rift in his madness. He remembered who he was, and all the old hatreds and bitterness welled up in him.

He remembered, too, what had happened in the compound, and wondered why the Venusian natives had not killed him. Why, instead, they had tied him here alone in the darkness of the jungle.

Afar, he heard the throbbing of the drums, and they were like the beating of the heart of night, and there was a louder, nearer sound that was the pulse of blood in his ears as the fear came to him.

The fear that he knew why they had tied him here. The horrible, gibbering fear that, for the last time, an army marched against him.

He had time to savor that fear to the uttermost, to have it become a creeping certainty that crawled into the black corners of his soul as would the soldiers of the coming army crawl into his ears and nostrils while others would eat away his eyelids to get at the eyes behind them.

And then, and only then, did he hear the sound that was like the rustle of dry leaves, in a dank, black jungle where there were no dry leaves to rustle nor breeze to rustle them.

Horribly, Number One, the last of the dictators, did not go mad again; not exactly, but he laughed, and laughed and laughed....

ULTIMA THULE

At least he'd got far enough to wind up with a personal interview. It's one thing doing up an application and seeing it go onto an endless tape and be fed into the maw of a machine and then to receive, in a matter of moments, a neatly printed rejection. It's another thing to receive an appointment to be interviewed by a placement officer in the Commissariat of Interplanetary Affairs, Department of Personnel. Ronny Bronston was under no illusions. Nine out of ten men of his age annually made the same application. Almost all were annually rejected. Statistically speaking practically nobody ever got an interplanetary position. But he'd made step one along the path of a lifetime ambition.

He stood at easy attention immediately inside the door. At the desk at the far side of the room the placement officer was going through a sheaf of papers. He looked up and said, "Ronald Bronston? Sit down. You'd like an interplanetary assignment, eh? So would I."

Ronny took the chair. For a moment he tried to appear alert, earnest, ambitious but not *too* ambitious, fearless, devoted to the cause, and indispensable. For a moment. Then he gave it up and looked like Ronny Bronston.

The other looked up and took him in. The personnel official saw a man of averages. In the late twenties. Average height,

weight and breadth. Pleasant of face in an average sort of way, but not handsome. Less than sharp in dress, hair inclined to be on the undisciplined side. Brown of hair, dark of eye. In a crowd, inconspicuous. In short, Ronny Bronston.

The personnel officer grunted. He pushed a button, said something into his order box. A card slid into the slot and he took it out and stared gloomily at it.

“What’re your politics?” he said.

“Politics?” Ronny Bronston said. “I haven’t any politics. My father and grandfather before me have been citizens of United Planets. There hasn’t been any politics in our family for three generations.”

“Family?”

“None.”

The other grunted and marked the card. “Racial prejudices?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do you have any racial prejudices? Any at all.”

“No.”

The personnel officer said, “Most people answer that way at first, these days, but some don’t at second. For instance, suppose you had to have a blood transfusion. Would you have any objection to it being blood donated by, say, a Negro, a Chinese, or, say, a Jew?”

Ronny ticked it off on his fingers. “One of my greatgrandfathers was a French *colon* who married a Moroccan girl. The Moors are a blend of Berber, Arab, Jew and Negro. Another of my greatgrandfathers was a Hawaiian. They’re largely a blend of Polynesians, Japanese, Chinese and Caucasians especially Portuguese. Another of my greatgrandfathers was Irish, English and Scotch. He married a girl who was half Latvian, half Russian.” Ronny wound it up. “Believe me, if I had a blood

transfusion from just anybody at all, the blood would feel right at home.”

The interviewer snorted, even as he marked the card. “That accounts for three greatgrandfathers,” he said lightly. “You seem to have made a study of your family tree. What was the other one?”

Rocky said expressionlessly, “A Texan.”

The secretary shrugged and looked at the card again. “Religion?”

“Reformed Agnostic,” Ronny said. This one was possibly where he ran into a brick wall. Many of the planets had strong religious beliefs of one sort or another. Some of them had state religions and you either belonged or else.

“Is there any such church?” the personnel officer frowned.

“No. I’m a one-man member. I’m of the opinion that if there are any greater-powers-that-be They’re keeping the fact from us. And if that’s the way They want it, it’s Their business. If and when They want to contact me—one of Their puppets dangling from a string—then I suppose They’ll do it. Meanwhile, I’ll wait.”

The other said interestedly, “You think that if there is a Higher Power and if It ever wants to get in touch with you, It will?”

“Um-m-m. In Its own good time. Sort of a *don’t call Me*, thing, *I’ll call you*.”

The personnel officer said, “There have been a few revealed religions, you know.”

“So they said, so they said. None of them have made much sense to me. If a Super-Power wanted to contact man, it seems unlikely to me that it’d be all wrapped up in a lot of complicated gobbledegook. It would all be very clear indeed.”

The personnel officer sighed. He marked the card, stuck it back into the slot in his order box and it disappeared.

He looked up at Ronny Bronston. "All right, that's all."

Ronny came to his feet. "Well, what happened?"

The other grinned at him sourly. "Darned if I know," he said. "By the time you get to the outer office, you'll probably find out." He scratched the end of his nose and said, "I sometimes wonder what I'm doing here."

Ronny thanked him, told him good-by, and left.

* * * *

In the outer office a girl looked up from a card she'd just pulled from her own order box. "Ronald Bronston?"

"That's right."

She handed the card to him. "You're to go to the office of Ross Metaxa in the Octagon, Commissariat of Interplanetary Affairs, Department of Justice, Bureau of Investigation, Section G."

In a lifetime spent in first preparing for United Planets employment and then in working for the organization, Ronny Bronston had never been in the Octagon Building. He'd seen photographs, Tri-Di broadcasts and he'd heard several thousand jokes on various levels from pun to obscenity about getting around in the building, but he'd never been there. For that matter, he'd never been in Greater Washington before, other than a long ago tourist trip. Population Statistics, his department, had its main offices in New Copenhagen.

His card was evidently all that he needed for entry.

At the sixth gate he dismissed his car and let it shoot back into the traffic mess. He went up to one of the guard-guides and presented the card.

The guide inspected it. "Section G of the Bureau of Investigation," he muttered. "Every day, something new. I never heard of it."

"It's probably some outfit in charge of cleaning the heads on space liners." Ronny said unhappily. He'd never heard of it either.

"Well, it's no problem," the guard-guide said. He summoned a three-wheel, fed the co-ordinates into it from Ronny's card, handed the card back and flipped an easy salute. "You'll soon know."

The scooter slid into the Octagon's hall traffic and proceeded up one corridor, down another, twice taking to ascending ramps. Ronny had read somewhere the total miles of corridors in the Octagon. He hadn't believed the figures at the time. Now he believed them. He must have traversed several miles before they got to the Department of Justice alone. It was another quarter mile to the Bureau of Investigation.

The scooter eventually came to a halt, waited long enough for Ronny to dismount and then hurried back into the traffic.

He entered the office. A neatly uniformed reception girl with a harassed and cynical eye looked up from her desk. "Ronald Bronston?" she said.

"That's right."

"Where've you been?" She had a snappy cuteness. "The commissioner has been awaiting you. Go through that door and to your left."

Ronny went through that door and to the left. There was another door, inconspicuously lettered *Ross Metaxa, Commissioner, Section G*. Ronny knocked and the door opened.

Ross Metaxa was going through a wad of papers. He looked up; a man in the middle years, sour of expression, moist of eye

as though he either drank too much or slept too little.

"Sit down," he said. "You're Ronald Bronston, eh? What do they call you, Ronny? It says here you've got a sense of humor. That's one of the first requirements in this lunatic department."

Ronny sat down and tried to form some opinions of the other by his appearance. He was reminded of nothing so much as the stereotype city editor you saw in the historical romance Tri-Ds. All that was needed was for Metaxa to start banging on buttons and yelling something about tearing down the front page, whatever that meant.

Metaxa said, "It also says you have some queer hobbies. Judo, small weapons target shooting, mountain climbing—" He looked up from the reports. "Why does anybody climb mountains?"

Ronny said, "Nobody's ever figured out." That didn't seem to be enough, especially since Ross Metaxa was staring at him, so he added, "Possibly we devotees keep doing it in hopes that someday somebody'll find out."

Ross Metaxa said sourly, "Not *too* much humor, please. You don't act as though getting this position means much to you."

Ronny said slowly, "I figured out some time ago that every young man on Earth yearns for a job that will send him shuttling from one planet to another. To achieve it they study, they sweat, they make all out efforts to meet and suck up to anybody they think might help. Finally, when and if they get an interview for one of the few openings, they spruce up in their best clothes, put on their best party manners, present themselves as the sincere, high I.Q., ambitious young men that they are—and then flunk their chance. I decided I might as well be what I am."

Ross Metaxa looked at him.

“Okay,” he said finally. “We’ll give you a try.”

Ronny said blankly, “You mean I’ve got the job?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Probably,” Metaxa said. He yawned. “Do you know what Section G handles?”

“Well no, but as for me, just so I get off Earth and see some of the galaxy.”

* * * *

Metaxa had been sitting with his heels on his desk. Now he put them down and reached a hand into a drawer to emerge with a brown bottle and two glasses. “Do you drink?” he said.

“Of course.”

“Even during working hours?” Metaxa scowled.

“When occasion calls.”

“Good,” Metaxa said. He poured two drinks. “You’ll get your fill of seeing the galaxy,” he said. “Not that there’s much to see. Man can settle only Earth-type planets and after you’ve seen a couple of hundred you’ve seen them all.”

Ronny sipped at his drink, then blinked reproachfully down into the glass.

Metaxa said, “Good, eh? A kind of tequila they make on Deneb Eight. Bunch of Mexicans settled there.”

“What,” said Ronny hoarsely, “do they make it out of?”

“Lord only knows,” Metaxa said. “To get back to Section G. We’re Interplanetary Security. In short, Department Cloak and Dagger. Would you be willing to die for the United Planets, Bronston?”

That curve had come too fast. Ronny blinked again. “Only in emergency,” he said. “Who’d want to kill me?”

Metaxa poured another drink. "Many of the people you'll be working with," he said.

"Well, *why*? What will I be doing?"

"You'll be representing United Planets," Metaxa explained. "Representing United Planets in cases where the local situation is such that the folks you're working among will be teed off at the organization."

"Well, why are they members if they don't like the UP?"

"That's a good question," Metaxa said. He yawned. "I guess I'll have to go into my speech." He finished his drink. "Now, shut up till I give you some background. You're probably full of a lot of nonsense you picked up in school."

Ronny shut up. He'd expected more of an air of dedication in the Octagon and in such ethereal departments as that of Interplanetary Justice, however, he was in now and not adverse to picking up some sophistication beyond the ken of the Earth-bound employees of UP.

The other's voice took on a far away, albeit bored tone. "It seems that most of the times man gets a really big idea, he goes off half cocked. Just one example. Remember when the ancient Hellenes exploded into the Mediterranean? A score of different City-States began sending out colonies, which in turn sprouted colonies of their own. Take Syracuse, on Sicily. Hardly was she established than, bingo, she sent off colonists to Southern Italy, and they in turn to Southern France, Corsica, the Balearics. Greeks were exploding all over the place, largely without adequate plans, without rhyme or reason. Take Alexander. Roamed off all the way to India, founding cities and colonies of Greeks all along the way."

The older man shifted in his chair. "You wonder what I'm getting at, eh? Well, much the same thing is happening in

man's explosion into space, now that he has the ability to leave the solar system behind. Dashing off half cocked, in all directions, he's flowing out over this section of the galaxy without plan, without rhyme or reason. I take that last back, he has reasons all right—some of the screwiest. Religious reasons, racial reasons, idealistic reasons, political reasons, altruistic reasons and mercenary reasons.

“Inadequate ships, manned by small numbers of inadequate people, setting out to find their own planets, to establish themselves on one of the numberless uninhabited worlds that offer themselves to colonization and exploitation.”

Ronny cleared his throat. “Well, isn't that a good thing, sir?”

Ross Metaxa looked at him and grunted. “What difference does it make if it's good or not? It's happening. We're spreading our race out over tens of hundreds of new worlds in the most haphazard fashion. As a result, we of United Planets now have a chaotic mishmash on our hands. How we manage to keep as many planets in the organization as we do, sometimes baffles me. I suppose most of them are afraid to drop out, conscious of the protection UP gives against each other.”

He picked up a report. “Here's Monet, originally colonized by a bunch of painters, writers, musicians and such. They had dreams of starting a new race”—Metaxa snorted—“with everybody artists. They were all so impractical that they even managed to crash their ship on landing. For three hundred years they were uncontacted. What did they have in the way of government by that time? A military theocracy, something like the Aztecs of Pre-Conquest Mexico. A matriarchy, at that. And what's their religion based on? That of ancient Phoenicia including plenty of human sacrifice to good old Moloch. What can United Planets do about it, now that they've become a

member? Work away very delicately, trying to get them to at least eliminate the child sacrifice phase of their culture. Will they do it? Hell no, not if they can help it. The Head Priestess and her clique are afraid that if they don't have the threat of sacrifice to hold over the people, they'll be overthrown."

Ronny was surprised. "I'd never heard of a member planet like that. Monet?"

Metaxa sighed. "No, of course not. You've got a lot to learn, Ronny, my lad. First of all, what're Articles One and Two of the United Planets Charter?"

That was easy. Ronny recited. "Article One: *The United Planets organization shall take no steps to interfere with the internal political, socio-economic, or religious institutions of its member planets.* Article Two: *No member planets of United Planets shall interfere with the internal political, socioeconomic or religious institutions of any other member planet.*" He looked at the department head. "But what's that got to do with the fact that I was unfamiliar with even the existence of Monet?"

"Suppose one of the advanced planets, or even Earth itself," Metaxa growled, "openly discussed in magazines, on newscasts, or wherever, the religious system of Monet. A howl would go up among the liberals, the progressives, the do-gooders. And the howl would be heard on the other advanced planets. Eventually, the citizen in the street on Monet would hear about it and be affected. And before you knew it, a howl would go up from Monet's government. Why? Because the other planets would be interfering with her internal affairs, simply by discussing them."

"So what you mean is," Ronny said, "part of our job is to keep information about Monet's government and religion from being discussed at all on other member planets."

"That's right," Metaxa nodded. "And that's just one of our dirty little jobs. One of many. Section G, believe me, gets them all. Which brings us to your first assignment."

Ronny inched forward in his chair. "It takes me into space?"

"It takes you into space all right," Metaxa snorted. "At least it will after a few months of indoctrination. I'm sending you out after a legend, Ronny. You're fresh, possibly you'll get some ideas older men in the game haven't thought of."

"A legend?"

"I'm sending you to look for Tommy Paine. Some members of the department don't think he exists. I do."

"Tommy Paine?"

"A pseudonym that somebody hung on him way back before even my memory in this Section. Did you ever hear of Thomas Paine in American history?"

"He wrote a pamphlet during the Revolutionary War, didn't he?"

"Common Sense," Metaxa nodded. "But he was more than that. He was born in England but went to America as a young man and his writings probably did as much as anything to put over the revolt against the British. But that wasn't enough. When that revolution was successful he went back to England and tried to start one there. The government almost caught him, but he escaped and got to France where he participated in the French Revolution."

"He seemed to get around," Ronny Bronston said.

"And so does this namesake of his. We've been trying to catch up with him for some twenty years. How long before that he was active, we have no way of knowing. It was some time before we became aware of the fact that half the revolts, rebel-

lions, revolutions and such that occur in the United Planets have his dirty finger stirring around in them.”

“But you said some department members don’t believe in his existence.”

Metaxa grunted. “They’re working on the theory that no one man could do all that Tommy Paine has laid to him. Possibly it’s true that he sometimes gets the blame for accomplishments not his. Or, for that matter, possibly he’s more than one person. I don’t know.”

“Well,” Ronny said hesitantly, “what’s an example of his activity?”

Metaxa picked up another report from the confusion of his desk. “Here’s one only a month old. Dictator on the planet Megas. Kidnapped and forced to resign. There’s still confusion but it looks as though a new type of government will be formed now.”

“But how do they know it wasn’t just some dissatisfied citizens of Megas?”

“It seems as though the kidnap vehicle was an old fashioned Earth-type helicopter. There were no such on Megas. So Section G suspects it’s a possible Tommy Paine case. We could be wrong, of course. That’s why I say the man’s in the way of being a legend. Perhaps the others are right and he doesn’t even exist. I think he does, and if so, it’s our job to get him and put him out of circulation.”

Ronny said slowly, “But why would that come under our jurisdiction? It seems to me that it would be up to the police of whatever planet he was on.”

Ross Metaxa looked thoughtfully at his brown bottle, shook his head and returned it to its drawer. He looked at a desk watch. “Don’t read into the United Planets organization more

than there is. It's a fragile institution with practically no independent powers to wield. Every member planet is jealous of its prerogatives, which is understandable. It's no mistake that Articles One and Two are the basic foundation of the Charter. No member planet wants to be interfered with by any other or by United Planets as an organization. They want to be left alone.

"Within our ranks we have planets with every religion known to man throughout the ages. Everything ranging from primitive animism to the most advanced philosophic ethic. We have every political system ever dreamed of, and every socio-economic system. It can all be blamed on the crack-pot manner in which we're colonizing. Any minority, no matter how small—religious, political, racial, or whatever—if it can collect the funds to buy or rent a spacecraft, can dash off on its own, find a new Earth-type planet and set up in business.

"Fine. One of the prime jobs of Section G is to carry out, to enforce, Articles One and Two of the Charter. A planet with Buddhism as its state religion, doesn't want some die-hard Baptist missionary stirring up controversy. A planet with a feudalistic socio-economic systems doesn't want some hot-shot interplanetary businessman coming in with some big deal that would eventually cause the feudalistic nobility to be tossed onto the ash heap. A planet with a dictatorship doesn't want subversives from some democracy trying to undermine their institutions—and vice versa."

"And its our job to enforce all this, eh?" Ronny said.

"That's right," Metaxa told him sourly. "It's not always the nicest job in the system. However, if you believe in United Planets, an organization attempting to co-ordinate in such manner as it can, the efforts of its member planets, for the bet-

terment of all, then you must accept Section G and Interplanetary Security.”

Ronny Bronston thought about it.

Metaxa added, “That’s why one of the requirements of this job is that you yourself be a citizen of United Planets, rather than of any individual planet, have no religious affiliations, no political beliefs, and no racial prejudices. You’ve got to be able to stand aloof.”

“Yeah,” Ronny said thoughtfully.

Ross Metaxa looked at his watch again and sighed wearily. “I’ll turn you over to one of my assistants,” he said. “I’ll see you again, though, before you leave.”

“Before I leave?” Ronny said, coming to his feet. “But where do I start looking for this Tommy Paine?”

“How the hell would I know?” Ross Metaxa growled.

* * * *

In the outer office, Ronny said to the receptionist, “Commissioner Metaxa said for me to get in touch with Sid Jakes.”

She said, “I’m Irene Kasansky. Are you with us?”

Ronny said, “I beg your pardon?”

She said impatiently, “Are you going to be with the Section? If you are, I’ve got to clear you with your old job. You were in statistics over in New Copenhagen, weren’t you?”

Somehow it seemed far away now, the job he’d held for more than five years. “Oh, yes,” he said. “Yes, Commissioner Metaxa has given me an appointment.”

She looked up at him. “Probably to look for Tommy Paine.”

He was taken aback. “That’s right. How did you know?”

“There was talk. This Section is pretty well integrated.” She grimaced, but on her it looked good. “One big happy family.

High interdepartmental morale. That sort of jetsam.” She flicked some switches. “You’ll find Supervisor Jakes through that door, one to your left, two to your right.”

He could have asked one *what* to his left and two *what* to his right, but evidently Irene Kasansky thought he had enough information to get him to his destination. She’d gone back to her work.

* * * *

It was one turn to his left and two turns to his right. The door was lettered simply *Sidney Jakes*. He knocked and a voice shouted happily, “It’s open. It’s always open.”

Supervisor Jakes was as informal as his superior. His attire was on the happy-go-lucky side, more suited for sports wear than a fairly high ranking job in the ultra-staid Octagon.

He couldn’t have been much older than Ronny Bronston but he had a nervous vitality about him that would have worn out the other in a few hours. He jumped up and shook hands. “You must be Bronston. Call me Sid.” He waved a hand at a typed report he’d been reading. “Now I’ve seen them all. They’ve just applied for entry to United Planets. Republic. What a name, eh?”

“What?” Ronny said.

“Sit down, sit down.” He rushed Ronny to a chair, saw him seated, returned to the desk and flicked an order box switch. “Irene,” he said, “do up a badge for Ronny, will you? You’ve got his code, haven’t you? Good. Send it over. Bronze, of course.”

Sid Jakes turned back to Ronny and grinned at him. He motioned to the report again. “What a name for a planet. Republic. Bunch of screw-balls, again. Out in the vicinity of Sirius. Based their system on Plato’s *Republic*. Have to go the

whole way. Don't even speak Basic. Certainly not. They speak Ancient Greek. That's going to be a neat trick, finding interpreters. How'd you like the Old Man?"

Ronny said, dazed at the conversational barrage, "Old Man? Oh, you mean Commissioner Metaxa."

"Sure, sure," Sid grinned, perching himself on the edge of the desk. "Did he give you that drink of tequila during working hours routine? He'd like to poison every new agent we get. What a character."

The grin was infectious. Ronny said carefully, "Well, I did think his method of hiring a new man was a little—cavalier."

"Cavalier, yet," Sid Jakes chortled. "Look, don't get the Old Man wrong. He knows what he's doing. He always knows what he's doing."

"But he took me on after only two or three minutes conversation."

Jakes cocked his head to one side. "Oh? You think so? When did you first apply for interplanetary assignment, Ronny?"

"I don't know, about three years ago."

Jakes nodded. "Well, depend on it, you've been under observation for that length of time. At any one period, Section G is investigating possibly a thousand potential agents. We need men but qualifications are high."

He hopped down from his position, sped around to the other side of the desk and lowered himself into his chair. "Don't get the wrong idea, though. You're not in. You're on probation. Whatever the assignment the Old Man gave you, you've got to carry it out successfully before you're full fledged." He flicked the order-box switch and said, "Irene, where the devil's Ronny's badge?"

Ronny Bronston heard the office girl's voice answer snappishly.

"All right, all right," Jakes said. "I love you, too. Send it in when it comes." He turned to Ronny. "What *is* your assignment?"

"He wants me to go looking for some firebrand nicknamed Tommy Paine. I'm supposed to arrest him. The commissioner said you'd give me details."

Sid Jakes' face went serious. He puckered up his lips. "Wow, that'll be a neat trick to pull off," he said. He flicked the order-box switch again. Irene's voice snapped something before he could say anything and Sid Jakes grinned and said, "Okay, okay, darling, but if this is the way you're going to be I won't marry you. Then what will the children say? Besides, that's not what I called about. Have ballistics do up a model H gun for Ronny, will you? Be sure it's adjusted to his code."

He flicked off the order box and turned back to Ronny. "I understand you're familiar with hand guns. It's in this report on you."

Ronny nodded. He was just beginning to adjust to this free-wheeling character. "What will I need a gun for?"

Jakes laughed. "Heavens to Betsy, you babe in the woods. Do you realize this Tommy Paine character has supposedly stirred up a couple of score wars, revolutions and revolts? Not to speak of having laid in his lap two or three dozen assassinations. He's a quick lad with a gun. A regular Nihilist."

"Nihilist?"

Jakes chuckled. "When you've been in this Section for a while, you'll be familiar with every screwball outfit man has ever dreamed up. The Nihilists were a European group, mostly Russian, back in the Nineteenth Century. They believed that by

bumping off a few Grand Dukes and a Czar or so they could force the ruling class to grant reforms. Sometimes they were pretty ingenious. Blew up trains, that sort of thing.”

“Look here,” Ronny said, “what motivates this Paine fellow? What’s he get out of all this trouble he stirs up?”

“Search me. Nobody seems to know. Some think he’s a mental case. For one thing, he’s not consistent.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, he’ll go to one planet and break his back trying to overthrow, say, feudalism. Then, possibly after being successful, he goes to another planet and devotes his energies to establishing the same socio-economic system.”

Ronny assimilated that. “You’re one of those who believes he exists?”

“Oh, he exists all right, all right,” Sid Jakes said happily. “Matter of fact, I almost ran into him a few years ago.”

Ronny leaned forward. “I guess I ought to know about it. The more information I have, the better.”

“Sure, sure,” Jakes said. “This deal of mine was on one of the Aldebaran planets. A bunch of nature boys had settled there.”

“Nature boys?”

“Um-m-m. Back to nature. The trouble with the human race is that it’s got too far away from nature. So a whole flock of them landed on this planet. They call it Mother, of all things. They landed and set up a primitive society. Absolute stone age. No metals. Lived by the chase and by picking berries, wild fruit, that sort of thing. Not even any agriculture. Wore skins. Bows and arrows were the nearest thing they allowed themselves in the way of mechanical devices.”

“Good grief,” Ronny said.

"It was a laugh," Jakes told him. "I was assigned there as Section G representative with the UP organization. Picture it. We had to wear skins for clothes. We had to confine ourselves to two or three long houses. Something like the American Iroquois lived in before Columbus. Their society on Mother was based on primitive communism. The clan, the phratry, the tribe. Their religion was mostly a matter of knocking into everybody's head that any progress was taboo. Oh, it was great."

"Well, were they happy?"

"What's happiness? I suppose they were as happy as anybody ever averages. Frankly, I didn't mind the assignment. Lots of fishing, lots of hunting."

Ronny said, "Well, where does Tommy Paine come in?"

"He snuck up on us. Started way back in the boondocks away from any of the larger primitive settlements. Went around putting himself over as a holy man. Cured people of various things from gangrene to eye diseases. Given antibiotics and such, you can imagine how successful he was."

"Well, what harm did he do?"

"I didn't say he did any harm. But in that manner he made himself awfully popular. Then he'd pull some trick like showing them how to smelt iron, and distribute some corn and wheat seed around and plant the idea of agriculture. The local witch doctors would try to give him a hard time, but the people figured he was a holy man."

"Well, what happened finally?" Ronny wasn't following too well.

"Communications being what they were, before he'd been discovered by the central organization—they had a kind of Council of Tribes which met once a year—he'd planted so many ideas that they couldn't be stopped. The young people'd

never go back to flint knives, once introduced to iron. We went looking for friend Tommy Paine, but he got wind of it and took off. We even found where he'd hidden his little space cruiser. Oh, it was Paine, all right, all right."

"But what harm did he do? I don't understand," Ronny scowled.

"He threw the whole shebang on its ear. Last I heard, the planet had broken up into three main camps. They were whaling away at each other like the Assyrians and Egyptians. Iron weapons, chariots, domesticated horses. Agriculture was sweeping the planet. Population was exploding. Men were making slaves out of each other, to put them to work. Oh, it was a mess from the viewpoint of the original nature boys."

A red light flickered on his desk and Sid Jakes opened a delivery drawer and dipped his hand into it. It emerged with a flat wallet. He tossed it to Ronny Bronston.

"Here you are. Your badge."

Ronny opened the wallet and examined it. He'd never seen one before, but for that matter he'd never heard of Section G before that morning. It was a simple enough bronze badge. It said on it, merely, *Ronald Bronston, Section G, Bureau of Investigation, United Planets*.

Sid Jakes explained. "You'll get co-operation with that through the Justice Department anywhere you go. We'll brief you further on procedure during indoctrination. You in turn, of course, are to co-operate with any other agent of Section G. You're under orders of anyone with"—his hand snaked into a pocket and emerged with a wallet similar to Ronny's—"a silver badge, carried by a First Grade Agent, or a gold one of Supervisor rank."

Ronny noted that his badge wasn't really bronze. It had a certain sheen, a brightness.

Jakes said, "Here, look at this." He tossed his own badge to the new man. Ronny looked down at it in surprise. The gold had gone dull.

Jakes laughed. "Now give me yours."

Ronny got up and walked over to him and handed it over. As soon as the other man's hand touched it, the bronze lost its sheen.

Jakes handed it back. "See, it's tuned to you alone," he said. "And mine is tuned to my code. Nobody can swipe a Section G badge and impersonate an agent. If anybody ever shows you a badge that doesn't have its sheen, you know he's a fake. Neat trick, eh?"

"Very neat," Ronny admitted. He returned the other's gold badge. "Look, to get back to this Tommy Paine."

But the red light flickered again and Jakes brought forth from the delivery drawer a hand gun complete with shoulder harness. "Nasty weapon," he said. "But we'd better go on down to the armory and show you its workings."

He stood up. "Oh, yes, don't let me forget to give you a communicator. A real gizmo. About as big as a woman's vanity case. Puts you in immediate contact with the nearest Section G office, no matter how near or far away it is. Or, if you wish, in contact with our offices here in the Octagon. Very neat trick."

He led Ronny from his office and down the corridors beyond to an elevator. He said happily, "This is a crazy outfit, this Section G. You'll probably love it. Everybody does."

* * * *

Ronny learned to love Section G—in moderation.

He was initially taken aback by the existence of the organization at all. He'd known, of course, of the Department of Justice and even of the Bureau of Investigation, but Section G was hush-hush and not even United Planets publications ever mentioned it.

The problems involved in remaining hush-hush weren't as great as all that. The very magnitude of the UP which involved more than two thousand member planets, allowed of departments and bureaus hidden away in the endless stretches of red tape.

In fact, although Ronny Bronston had spent the better part of his life, thus far, in studying for a place in the organization, and then working in the Population Statistics Department for some years, he was only now beginning to get the over-all picture of the workings of the mushrooming, chaotic United Planets organization.

It was Earth's largest industry by far. In fact, for all practical purposes it was her only major industry. Tourism, yes, but even that, in a way, was related to the United Planets organization. Millions of visitors whose ancestors had once emigrated from the mother planet, streamed back in racial nostalgia. Streamed back to see the continents and oceans, the Arctic and the Antarctic, the Amazon River and Mount Everest, the Sahara and New York City, the ruins of Rome and Athens, the Vatican, the Louvre and the Hermitage.

But the populace of Earth, in its hundreds of millions were largely citizens of United Planets and worked in the organization and with its auxiliaries such as the Space Forces.

Section G? To his surprise, Ronny found that Ross Metaxa's small section of the Bureau of Investigation seemed almost as great a secret within the Bureau as it was to the man in the

street. At one period, Ronny wondered if it were possible that this was a department which had been lost in the wilderness of boondoggling that goes on in any great bureaucracy. Had Section G been set up a century or so ago and then forgotten by those who had originally thought there was a need for it? In the same way that it is usually more difficult to get a statute off the lawbooks than it was originally to pass it, in the same manner eliminating an office, with its employees can prove more difficult than originally establishing it.

But that wasn't it. In spite of the informality, the unconventional brashness of its personnel on all levels, and the seeming chaos in which its tasks were done, Section G was no make-work project set up to provide juicy jobs for the relatives of high ranking officials. To the contrary, it didn't take long in the Section before anybody with open eyes could see that Ross Metaxa was privy to the decisions made by the upper echelons of UP.

Ronny Bronston came to the conclusion that the appointment he'd received was putting him in a higher bracket of the UP hierarchy than he'd at first imagined.

His indoctrination course was a strain such as he'd never known in school years. Ross Metaxa was evidently of the opinion that a man could assimilate concentrated information at a rate several times faster than any professional educator ever dreamed possible. No threats were made, but Ronny realized that he could be dropped even more quickly than he'd seemed to have been taken on. There were no classes, to either push or retard the rate of study. He worked with a series of tutors, and pushed himself. The tutors were almost invariably Section G agents, temporarily in Greater Washington between assignments, or for briefing on this phase or that of their work.

Even as he studied, Ronny Bronston kept the eventual assignment, at which he was to prove himself, in mind. He made a point of inquiring of each agent he met, about Tommy Paine.

The name was known to all, but no two reacted in the same manner. Several of them even brushed the whole matter aside as pure legend. *Nobody* could accomplish all the trouble that Tommy Paine had supposedly stirred up.

To one of these, Ronny said plaintively, "See here, the Old Man believes in him, Sid Jakes believes in him. My final appointment depends on arresting him. How can I ever secure this job, if I'm chasing a myth?"

The other shrugged. "Don't ask me. I've got my own problems. Okay, now, let's run over this question of Napoleonic law. There are at least two hundred planets that base their legal system on it."

But the majority of his fellow employees in Section G had strong enough opinions on the interplanetary firebrand. Three or four even claimed to have seen him fleetingly, although no two descriptions jibed. That, of course, could be explained. The man could resort to plastic surgery and other disguise.

Theories there were in plenty, some of them going back long years, and some of them pure fable.

* * * *

"Look," Ronny said in disgust one day after a particularly unbelievable siege with two agents recently returned from a trouble spot in a planetary system that involved three aggressive worlds which revolved about the same sun. "Look, it's impossible for one man to accomplish all this. He's blamed for half the *coups d'états*, revolts and upheavals that have taken place for the past quarter century. It's obvious nonsense. Why, a revolution-

ist usually spends the greater part of his life toppling a government. Then, once it's toppled, he spends the rest of his life trying to set up a new government—and he's usually unsuccessful."

One of the others was shaking his head negatively. "You don't understand this Tommy Paine's system, Bronston."

"You sure don't," the other agent, a Nigerian, grinned widely. "I've been on planets where he'd operated."

Ronny leaned forward. The three of them were having a beer in a part of the city once called Baltimore. "You have?" he said. "Tell me about it, eh? The more background I get on this guy, the better."

"Sure. And this'll give you an idea of how he operates, how he can get so much trouble done. Well, I was on this planet Goshen, understand? It had kind of a strange history. A bunch of colonists went out there, oh, four or five centuries ago. Pretty healthy expedition, as such outfits go. Bright young people, lots of equipment, lots of know-how and books. Well, through sheer bad luck everything went wrong from the beginning. Everything. Before they got set up at all they had an explosion that killed off all their communications technicians. They lost contact with the outside. Okay. Within a couple of centuries they'd gotten into a state of chattel slavery. Pretty well organized, but static. Kind of an Athenian Democracy on top, a hierarchy, but nineteen people out of twenty were slaves, and I mean real slaves, like animals. They were at this stage when a scout ship from the UP Space Forces discovered them and, of course, they joined up."

"Where does Tommy Paine come in?" Ronny said. He signaled to a waiter for more beer.

“He comes in a few years later. I was the Section G agent on Goshen, understand? No planet was keener about Articles One and Two of the UP Charter. The hierarchy understood well enough that if their people ever came to know about more advanced socio-economic systems it’d be the end of Goshen’s Golden Age. So they allowed practically no intercourse. No contact whatsoever between UP personnel and anyone outside the upper class, understand? All right. That’s where Tommy Paine came in. It couldn’t have taken him more than a couple of months at most.”

Ronny Bronston was fascinated. “What’d he do?”

“He introduced the steam engine, and then left.”

Ronny was looking at him blankly. “Steam engine?”

“That and the fly shuttle and the spinning jenny,” the Nigerian said. “That Goshen hierarchy never knew what hit them.”

Ronny was still blank. The waiter came up with the steins of beer, and Ronny took one and drained half of it without taking his eyes from the storyteller.

The other agent took it up. “Don’t you see? Their system was based on chattel slavery, hand labor. Given machinery and it collapses. Chattel slavery isn’t practical in a mechanized society. Too expensive a labor force, for one thing. Besides, you need an educated man and one with some initiative—qualities that few slaves possess—to run an industrial society.”

Ronny finished his beer. “Smart cooky, isn’t he?”

“He’s smart all right. But I’ve got a still better example of his fouling up a whole planetary socio-economic system in a matter of weeks. A friend of mine was working on a planet with a highly-developed feudalism. Barons, lords, dukes, counts and no-accounts, all stashed safely away in castles and fortresses up on the top of hills. The serfs down below did all

the work in the fields, provided servants, artisans and foot soldiers for the continual fighting that the aristocracy carried on. Very similar to Europe back in the Dark Ages.”

“So?” Ronny said. “I’d think that’d be a deal that would take centuries to change.”

The Section G agent laughed. “Tommy Paine stayed just long enough to introduce gunpowder. That was the end of those impregnable castles up on the hills.”

“What gets me,” Ronny said slowly, “is his motivation.”

The other two both grunted agreement to that.

* * * *

Toward the end of his indoctrination studies, Ronny appeared one morning at the Octagon Section G offices and before Irene Kasansky. Watching her fingers fly, listening to her voice rapping and snapping, okay-ing and rejecting, he came to the conclusion that automation could go just so far in office work and then you were thrown back on the hands of the efficient secretary. Irene was a one-woman office staff.

She looked up at him. “Hello, Ronny. Thought you’d be off on your assignment by now. Got any clues on Tommy Paine?”

“No,” he said. “That’s why I’m here. I wanted to see the commissioner.”

“About what?” She flicked a switch. When a light flickered on one of her order boxes, she said into it, “No,” emphatically, and turned back to him.

“He said he wanted to see me again before I took off.”

She fiddled some more, finally said, “All right, Ronny. Tell him he’s got time for five minutes with you.”

“Five minutes!”

"Then he's got an appointment with the Commissioner of Interplanetary Culture," she said. "You'd better hurry along."

Ronny Bronston retraced the route of his first visit here. How long ago? It already seemed ages since his probationary appointment. Your life changed fast when you were in Section G.

Ross Metaxa's brown bottle, or its twin, was sitting on his desk and he was staring at it glumly. He looked up and scowled.

"Ronald Bronston," Ronny said. "Irene Kasansky told me to say I could have five minutes with you, then you have an appointment with the Commissioner of Interplanetary Culture."

"I remember you," Metaxa said. "Have a drink. Interplanetary Culture, ha! The Xanadu Folk Dance Troupe. They dance nude. They've been touring the whole UP. Roaring success everywhere, obviously. Now they're assigned to Virtue, a planet settled by a bunch of Fundamentalists. They want the troupe to wear Mother Hubbards. The Xanadu outfit is in a tizzy. They've been insulted. They claim they're the most modest members of UP, that nudity has nothing to do with modesty. The government of Virtue said that's fine but they wear Mother Hubbards or they don't dance. Xanadu says it'll withdraw from United Planets."

Ronny Bronston said painfully, "Why not let them?"

Ross Metaxa poured himself a Denebian tequila, offered his subordinate a drink again with a motion of the bottle. Ronny shook his head.

Metaxa said, "If we didn't take steps to soothe these things over, there wouldn't be any United Planets. In any given century every member in the organization threatens to resign at least once. Even Earth. And then what'd happen? You'd have

interplanetary war before you knew it. What'd you want, Ronny?"

"I'm about set to take up my search for this Tommy Paine."

"Ah, yes, Tommy Paine. If you catch him, there are a dozen planets where he'd be eligible for the death sentence."

Ronny cleared his throat. "There must be. What I wanted was the file on him, sir."

"File?"

"Yes, sir. I've got to the point where I want to cram up on everything we have on him. So far, all I've got is verbal information from individual agents and from Supervisor Jakes."

"Don't be silly, Ronny. There isn't any file on Tommy Paine."

Ronny just looked at the other.

Ross Metaxa said impatiently, "The very knowledge of the existence of the man is top secret. Isn't that obvious? Suppose some reporter got the story and printed it. If our member planets knew there was such a man and that we haven't been able to scotch him, why they'd drop out of UP so fast the computers couldn't keep up with it. There's not one planet in ten that feels secure enough to lay itself open to subversion. Why some of our planets are so far down the ladder of social evolution they live under primitive tribal society; their leaders, their wise men and witch-doctors, whatever you call them, are scared someone will come along and establish chattel slavery. Those planets that have a system based on slavery are scared to death of developing feudalism, and those that have feudalism are afraid of *creeping capitalism*. Those with an anarchistic basis—and we have several—are afraid of being subverted to statism, and those who have a highly developed government are afraid of anarchism. The socio-economic systems based on private ownership of property hate the very idea of socialism or communism, and

vice versa, and those planets with state capitalism hate them both.”

* * * *

He glared at Ronny. “What do you think the purpose of this Section is, Bronston? Our job is to keep our member planets from being afraid of each other. If they found that Tommy Paine and his group, if he’s got a group, were buzzing through the system subverting everything they can foul up, they’d drop out of UP and set up quarantines that a space mite couldn’t get through. No sir, there is no file on Tommy Paine and there never will be. And if any news of him spreads to the outside, this Section will emphatically deny he exists. I hope that’s clear.”

“Well, yes sir,” Ronny said. The commissioner had been all but roaring toward the end.

The order box clicked on Ross Metaxa’s desk and he said loudly, “What?”

“Don’t yell at me,” Irene snapped back. “Ronny’s five minutes are up. You’ve got an appointment. I’m getting tired of this job. It’s a mad-house. I’m going to quit and get a job with Interplanetary Finance.”

“Oh, yeah.” Ross snarled back. “That’s what you think. I’ve taken measures. Top security. I’ve warned off every Commissioner in UP. You can’t get away from me until you reach retirement age. Although I don’t know why I care. I hate nasty tempered women.”

“Huh!” she snorted and clicked off.

“There’s a woman for you,” Ross Metaxa growled at Ronny. “It’s too bad she’s indispensable. I’d love to fire her. Look, you go in and see Sid Jakes. Seems to me he said something about

Tommy Paine this morning. Maybe it's a lead." He came to his feet. "So long and good luck, Ronny. I feel optimistic about you. I think you'll get this Paine troublemaker."

Which was more than Ronny Bronston thought.

Sid Jakes already had a visitor in his office, which didn't prevent him from yelling, "It's open," when Ronny Bronston knocked.

He bounced from his chair, came around the desk and shook hands enthusiastically. "Ronny!" he said, his tone implying they were favorite brothers for long years parted. "You're just in time."

Ronny took in the office's other occupant appreciatively. She was a small girl, almost tiny. He estimated her to be at least half Chinese, or maybe Indo-Chinese, the rest probably European or North American.

She evidently favored her Asiatic blood, her dress was traditional Chinese, slit almost to the thigh Shanghai style.

Sid Jakes said, "Tog Lee Chang Chu—Ronny Bronston. You'll be working together. Bloodhounding old Tommy Paine. A neat trick if you can pull it off. Well, are you all set to go?"

Ronny mumbled something to the girl in the way of amenity, then looked back at the supervisor. "Working together?" he said.

"That's right. Lucky you, eh?"

Tog Lee Chang Chu said demurely, "Possibly Mr. Bronston objects to having a female assistant."

Sid Jakes snorted, and hurried around his desk to resume his seat. "Does he look crazy? Who'd object to having a cutey like you around day in and day out? Call him Ronny. Might as well get used to it. Two of you'll be closer than man and wife."

“Assistant?” Ronny said, bewildered. “What do I need an assistant for?” He turned his eyes to the girl. “No reflection on you, Miss...ah, Tog.”

Sid Jakes laughed easily. “Section G operatives always work in pairs, Ronny. Especially new agents. The advantages will come home to you as you go along. Look on Tog Lee Chang Chu as a secretary, a man Friday. This isn’t her first assignment, of course. You’ll find her invaluable.”

The supervisor plucked a card from an order box. “Now here’s the dope. Can you leave within four hours? There’s a UP Space Forces cruiser going to Merlini, they can drop you off at New Delos. Fastest way you could possibly get there. The cruiser takes off from Neuve Albuquerque in, let’s see, three hours and forty-five minutes.”

“New Delos?” Ronny said, taking his eyes from the girl and trying to catch up with the grasshopper-like conversation of his superior.

“New Delos it is,” Jakes said happily. “With luck, you might catch him before he can get off the planet.” He chuckled at the other’s expression. “Look alive, Ronny! The quarry is flushed and on the run. Tommy Paine’s just assassinated the Immortal God-King of New Delos. A neat trick, eh?”

* * * *

The following hours were chaotic. There was no indication of how long a period he’d be gone. For all he knew, it might be years. For that matter, he might never return to Earth. This Ronny Bronston had realized before he ever applied for an interplanetary appointment. Mankind was exploding through this spiral arm of the galaxy. There was a racial enthusiasm about it all. Man’s destiny lay out in the stars, only a laggard

stayed home of his own accord. It was the ambition of every youth to join the snowballing avalanche of man into the neighboring stars.

It took absolute severity by Earth authorities to prevent the depopulation of the planet. But someone had to stay to administer the ever more complicated racial destiny. Earth became a clearing house for a thousand cultures, attempting, with only moderate success, to co-ordinate her widely spreading children. She couldn't afford to let her best seed depart. Few there were, any more, allowed to emigrate from Earth. New colonies drew their immigrants from older ones.

Lucky was the Earthling able to find service in interplanetary affairs, in any of the thousands of tasks that involved journey between member planets of UP. Possibly one hundredth of the population at one time or another, and for varying lengths of time, managed it.

Ronny Bronston was lucky and knew it. The thing now was to pull off this assignment and cinch the appointment for good.

He packed in a swirl of confusion. He phoned a relative who lived in the part of town once known as Richmond, explained the situation and asked that the other store his things and dispose of the apartment he'd been occupying.

Luckily, the roof of his apartment building was a copter-cab pickup point and he was able to hustle over to the shuttleport in a matter of a few minutes.

He banged into the reservations office, hurried up to one of the windows and said into the screen, "I've got to get to Neuve Albuquerque immediately."

The expressionless voice said, "The next rocket leaves at sixteen hours."

"Sixteen hours! I've got to be at the spaceport by that time!"

The voice said dispassionately, "We are sorry."

The bottom fell out of everything. Ronny said, desperately, "Look, if I miss my ship in Neuve Albuquerque, what is the next spaceliner leaving from there for New Delos?"

"A moment, citizen." There was an agonized wait, and then the voice said, "There is a liner leaving for New Delos on the 14th of next month. It arrives in New Delos on the 31st, Basic Earth calendar."

The 31st! Tommy Paine could be halfway across the galaxy by that time.

A gentle voice next to him said, "Could I help, Ronny?"

He looked around at her. "Evidently, nobody can," he said disgustedly. "There's no way of getting to Neuve Albuquerque in time to get that cruiser to New Delos."

Tog Lee Chang Chu fished in her bag and came up with a wallet similar to the one in which Ronny carried his Section G badge. She held it up to the screen. "Bureau of Investigation, Section G," she said calmly. "It will be necessary that Agent Bronston and myself be in Neuve Albuquerque within the hour."

The metallic voice said, "Of course. Proceed to your right and through Corridor K to Exit Four. Your rocket will be there. Identify yourself to Lieutenant Economou who will be at the desk at Exit Four."

Tog turned to Ronny Bronston. "Shall we go?" she said demurely.

He cleared his throat, feeling foolish. "Thanks, Tog," he said.

"Not at all, Ronny. Why, this is my job."

Was there the faintest of sarcasm in her voice? It hadn't been more than a couple of hours ago that he had been hinting

rather heavily to Sid Jakes that he needed no assistance.

She even knew the layout of the West Greater Washington shuttleport. Her small body swiveled through the hurrying passengers, her small feet a-twinkle, as she led him to and down Corridor K and then to the desk at Exit Four.

Ronny anticipated her here. He flashed his own badge at the chair-borne Space Forces lieutenant there.

“Lieutenant Economou?” he said. “Ronald Bronston, of the Bureau of Investigation, Section G. We’ve got to get to Neuve Albuquerque soonest.”

The lieutenant, only mildly impressed, said, “We can have you in the air in ten minutes, citizen. Just a moment and I’ll guide you myself.”

* * * *

In the rocket, Ronny had time to appraise her at greater length. She was a delicately pretty thing, although her expression was inclined to the over-serious. There was only a touch of the Mongolian fold at the corner of her eyes. On her it looked unusually good. Her complexion was that which only the blend of Chinese and Caucasian can give. Her figure, thanks to her European blood, was fuller than Eastern Asia usually boasts; tiny, but full.

Let’s admit it, he decided. My assistant is the cutest trick this side of a Tri-Di movie queen, and we’re going to be thrown in the closest of juxtaposition for an indefinite time. This comes under the head of work?

He said, “Look here, Tog, you were with Sid Jakes longer than I was. What’s the full story?”

She folded her slim hands in her lap, looking like a school-girl about to recite. “Do you know anything about the socio-

economic system on New Delos?”

“Well, no,” he admitted.

She said severely, “I’d think that they would have given you more background before an assignment of this type.”

Ronny said impatiently, “In the past three months I’ve been filled in on the economic systems, the religious beliefs, the political forms, of a thousand planets. I just happened to miss New Delos.”

Her mouth expressed disapproval by rucking down on the sides, which was all very attractive but also irritating. She said, “There are two thousand, four hundred and thirty-six member planets in the UP, I’d think an agent of Section G would be up on the basic situation on each.”

He had her there. He said snidely, “Hate to contradict you, Tog, but the number is two thousand, four hundred and thirty-four.”

“Then,” she nodded agreeably, “membership has changed since this morning when Menalaus and Aldebaran Three were admitted. Have two planets dropped out?”

“Look,” he said, “let’s stop bickering. What’s the word on New Delos?”

“Did you ever read Frazer’s *Golden Bough*?” she said.

“No.”

“You should. At any rate, New Delos is a theocracy. A priesthood elite rules it. A God-King, who is immortal, holds absolute authority. The strongest of superstition plus an efficient inquisition, keeps the people under control.”

“Sounds terrible,” Ronny growled.

“Why? Possibly the government is extremely efficient and under it the planet progressing at a rate in advance of UP averages.”

He stared at her in surprise.

She said, "Would you rather be ruled by the personal, arbitrary whims of supremely wise men, or by laws formulated by a mob?"

It stopped him momentarily. In all his adult years, he couldn't remember ever meeting an intelligent, educated person who had been opposed to the democratic theory.

"Wait a minute, now," he said. "Who decides that they're supremely wise men who are doing this arbitrary ruling? Let any group come to power, by whatever means, and they'll soon tell you they're an elite. But let's get back to New Delos, from what you've said so far, the people are held in a condition of slavery."

"What's wrong with slavery?" Tog said mildly.

He all but glared at her. "Are you kidding?"

"I seldom jest," Tog said primly. "Under the proper conditions, slavery can be the most suitable system for a people."

"Under *what* conditions!"

"Have you forgotten your Earth history to the point where Egypt, Greece and Rome mean nothing to you? Man made some of his outstanding progress under slavery. And do you contend that man's lot is necessarily miserable given slavery? As far back as Aesop we know of slaves who have reached the heights in their society. Slaves sometimes could and did become the virtual rulers in ancient countries." She shrugged prettily. "The prejudices which you hold today, on Earth, do not necessarily apply to all time, nor to all places."

He said, impatiently, "Look, Tog, we can go into this further, later. Let's get back to New Delos. What happened?"

Tog said, "The very foundation of their theocracy is the belief on the part of the populace that the God-King is immortal.

No man conspires against his Deity. Supervisor Jakes informed me that it is understood by UP Intelligence, that about once every twenty years the priesthood secretly puts in a new God-King. Plastic surgery would guarantee facial resemblance, and, of course, the rank and file citizen would probably never be allowed close enough to discover that their God-King seemed different every couple of decades. At any rate, it's been working for some time."

"And there's been no revolt against this religious aristocracy?"

She shook her head. "Evidently not. It takes a brave man to revolt against both his king and his God at the same time."

"But what happened now?" Ronny pursued.

"Evidently, right in the midst of a particularly important religious ceremony, with practically the whole planet watching on TV, the God-King was killed with a bomb. No doubt about it, definitely killed. There are going to be a lot of people on New Delos wondering how it can be that an immortal God-King can die."

"And Sid thinks it's Tommy Paine's work?"

She shifted dainty shoulders in a shrug. "It's the sort of thing he does. I suppose we'll learn when we get there."

* * * *

Even on the fast Space Forces cruiser, the trip was going to take a week, and there was precious little Ronny Bronston could do until arrival. He spent most of his time reading up on New Delos and the several other planets in the UP organization which had fairly similar regimes. More than a few theocracies had come and gone during the history of man's development into the stars.

He also spent considerable time playing Battle Chess or talking with Tog and with the ship's officers.

These latter were a dedicated group, high in morale, enthusiastic about their work which evidently involved the combined duties of a Navy, a Coast Guard, and a Coast and Geodetic Survey system, if we use the ocean going services of an earlier age for analogy.

They all had the dream. The enthusiasm of men participating in a race's expansion to glory. There was the feeling, even stronger here in space than back on Earth, of man's destiny being fulfilled, that humanity had finally emerged from its infancy, that the fledgling had finally found its wings and got off the ground.

After one of his studying binges, Ronny Bronston had spent an hour or so once with the captain of the craft, while that officer stood an easy watch on the ship's bridge. There was little enough to do in space, practically nothing, but there was always an officer on watch.

They leaned back in the acceleration chairs before the ship's controls and Ronny listened to the other's space lore. Stories of far planets, as yet untouched. Stories of planets that had seemingly been suitable for colonization, but had proved disastrous for man, for this reason or that.

Ronny said, "And never in all this time have we run into a life form that has proved intelligent?"

Captain Woiski said, "No. Not that I know of. There was an animal on Shangri-La of about the mental level of the chimpanzee. So far as I know, that's the nearest to it."

"Shangri-La?" Ronny said. "That's a new one."

There was an affectionate gleam in the captain's eye. "Yes," he said. "If and when I retire, I think that'd be the planet of my

choice, if I could get permission to leave Earth, of course.”

Ronny scowled in attempted memory. “Now that you mention it, I think I did see it listed the other day among planets with a theocratic government.”

The captain grunted protest. “If you’re comparing it to this New Delos you’re going to, you’re wrong. There can be theocracy and theocracy, I suppose. Actually, I imagine Shangri-La has the most, well *gentle* government in the system.”

Ronny was interested. His recent studies hadn’t led him to much respect for a priesthood in political power. “What’s the particular feature that’s seemed to have gained your regard?”

“Moderation,” Woiski chuckled. “They carry it almost to the point of immoderation. But not quite. Briefly, it works something like this. They have a limited number of monks—I suppose you’d call them—who spend their time at whatever moves them. At the arts, at scientific research, at religious contemplation—any religion will do—as students of anything and everything, and at the governing of Shangri-La. They make a point of enjoying the luxuries in moderation and aren’t a severe drain on the rank and file citizens of the planet.”

Ronny said, “I have a growing distrust of hierarchies. Who decides who is to become a monk and who remain a member of the rank and file?”

The captain said, “A series of the best tests they can devise to determine a person’s intelligence and aptitudes. From earliest youth, the whole populace is checked and rechecked. At the age of thirty, when it is considered that a person has become adult and has finished his basic education, a limited number are offered monkhood. Not all want it.”

Ronny thought about it. “Why not? What are the shortcomings?”

The captain shrugged. "Responsibility, I suppose."

"The monks aren't allowed sex, booze, that sort of thing, I imagine."

"Good heavens, why not? In moderation, of course."

"And they live on a higher scale?"

"No, no, not at all. Don't misunderstand. The planet is a prosperous one. Exceedingly prosperous. There is everything needed for comfortable existence for everyone. Shangri-La is one planet where the pursuit of happiness is pursuable by all." Captain Woiski chuckled again.

Ronny said, "It sounds good enough, although I'm leery of benevolent dictatorships. The trouble with them is that it's up to the dictators to decide what's benevolent. And almost always, nepotism rears its head, favoritism of one sort or another. How long will it be before one of your moderate monks decides he'll moderately tinker with the tests, or whatever, just to be sure his favorite nephew makes the grade? A high I.Q. is no guarantee of integrity."

The captain didn't disagree. "That's always possible, I suppose. One guard against it, in this case, is the matter of motive. The *privilege* of being a monk isn't as great as all that. Materially, you aren't particularly better off than any one else. You have more leisure, that's true, but actually most of them are so caught up in their studies or research that they put in more hours of endeavor than does the farmer or industrial worker on Shangri-La."

"Well," Ronny said, "let's just hope that Tommy Paine never hears of this place."

"Who?" the captain said.

Ronny Bronston reversed his engines. "Oh, nobody important. A guy I know of."

Captain Woiski scowled. "Seems to me I've heard the name."

At first Ronny leaned forward with quick interest. Perhaps the cruiser's skipper had a lead. But, no, he sank back into his chair. That name was strictly a Section G pseudonym. No one used it outside the department, and he'd already said too much by using the term at all.

Ronny said idly, "Probably two different people. I think I'll go on back and see how Tog is doing."

* * * *

Tog was at her communicator when he entered the tiny ship's lounge. Ronny could see in the brilliant little screen of the compact device, the grinning face of Sid Jakes. Tog looked up at Ronny and smiled, then clicked the device off.

"What's new?" Ronny said.

She moved graceful shoulders. "I just called Supervisor Jakes. Evidently there's complete confusion on New Delos. Mobs are storming the temples. In the capital the priests tried to present a new God-King and he was laughed out of town."

Ronny snorted cynically. "Sounds good to me. The more I read about New Delos and its God-King and his priesthood, the more I think the best thing that ever happened to the planet was this showing them up."

Tog looked at him, the sides of her mouth tucking down as usual when she was going to contradict something he said. "It sounds bad to me," she said. "Tommy Paine's work is done. He'll be off to some other place and we won't get there in time to snare him."

Ronny considered that. It was probably true. "I wonder," he said slowly, "if it's possible for us to get a list of all ships that

have blasted off since the assassination, all ships and their destination from New Delos.”

The idea grew in him. “Look! It’s possible that a dictatorial government such as theirs would immediately quarantine every spaceport on the planet.”

Tog said, “There’s only one spaceport on New Delos. The priesthood didn’t encourage trade or even communication with the outside. Didn’t want its people contaminated.”

“Holy smokes!” Ronny blurted. “It’s possible that Tommy Paine’s on that planet and can’t get off. Look, Tog, see if you can raise the Section G representative on New Delos and—”

Tog said demurely, “I already have taken that step, Ronny, knowing that you’d want me to. Agent Mouley Hassan has promised to get the name and destination of every passenger that leaves New Delos.”

Ronny sat down at a table and dialed himself a mug of stout. “Drink?” he said to Tog. “Possibly we’ve got something to celebrate.”

She shook her head disapprovingly. “I don’t use depressants.”

There was nothing more to be discussed about New Delos, they simply would have to wait until their arrival. Ronny switched subjects. “Ever hear of the planet Shangri-La?” he asked her. He took a sip of his brew.

“Of course,” she said. “A rather small planet, Earth type within four degrees. Noted for its near perfect climate and its scenic beauty.”

“Captain was talking about it,” Ronny said. “Sounds like a regular paradise.”

Tog made a negative sound.

“Well, what’s wrong with Shangri-La?” Ronny said impatiently.

“Static,” she said briefly.

He looked at her. “It sounds to me as though it’s developed a near perfect socio-economic system. What do you mean, static?”

“No push, no drive,” Tog said definitely. “Everyone—what is the old term?—everyone has it made. The place is stagnating. I wouldn’t be surprised to see Tommy Paine show up there sooner or later.”

Ronny said, “Look, since we’ve known each other, have I ever said anything you agree with?”

Tog raised her delicate eyebrows. “Why, Ronny. You know perfectly well we both agreed that the eggs for breakfast were quite inedible.”

Ronny came to his feet again. Considering her size, she certainly was an irritating baggage. “I think I’ll go to my room and see if I can get any inspirations on tracking down our quarry.”

“Good night, Ronny,” she said demurely.

* * * *

They ran into a minor difficulty upon arrival at New Delos. The captain called both Ronny Bronston and Tog Lee Chang Chu to the bridge.

He nodded in the direction of the communications screen. A bald headed, robed character—obviously a priest—scowled at them.

Captain Woiski said, “The Sub-Bishop informs me that the provisional government has ruled that any spacecraft landing on New Delos cannot take off again without permission and

that every individual who lands, even United Planets personnel, will need an exit visa before being allowed to depart."

Ronny said, "Then you can't land?"

The captain said reasonably, "My destination is Merlini. I've gone out of my way slightly to drop you off here. But I can't afford to take the chance of having my ship tied up for what might be an indefinite period. Evidently, there's considerably civil disorder down there."

From the screen the priest snapped, "That is an inaccurate manner of describing the situation."

"Sorry," the captain said dryly.

Ronny Bronston said desperately, "But, captain, Miss Tog and I simply have to land." He reached for his badge. "High priority, Bureau of Investigation."

The captain shrugged his hefty shoulders. "Sorry, I have no instructions that allow me to risk tying up my ship. Here's a possibility. Can you pilot a landing craft? I could spare you one, then you and your assistant would be the only ones involved. You could turn it over to whatever Space Forces base we have here."

Ronny said miserably, "No. I'm not a space pilot."

"I am," Tog said softly. "The idea sounds excellent."

"We shall expect you," the Sub-Bishop said. The screen went blank.

Tog Lee Chang Chu piloted a landing craft with the same verve that she seemed to be able to handle any other responsibility. As he sat in the seat next to her, Ronny Bronston took in her practiced flicking of the controls from the side of his eyes. He wondered vaguely at the efficiency of such Section G officials as Metaxa and Jakes that they would assign an unknown quality such as himself to a task as important as running down

Tommy Paine, and then as an assistant provide him with an experienced operative such as Tog. The bureaucratic mind can be a dilly, he decided. Was the fact that she was a rather delicately constructed girl a factor? He felt the weight of the Model-H gun nestled under his left armpit. Perhaps in the clutch Section G preferred men as agents.

They swooped into a landing that brought them as close to the control tower as was practical. In a matter of moments there was a guard of twenty or more sloppily uniformed men about their small craft.

Tog made a move. "Welcoming committee," she said.

* * * *

They climbed out the circular port, and flashed their United Planets Bureau of Investigation badges to the youngish looking soldier who seemed in command. He was indecisive.

"United Planets?" he said. "All I know is I'm supposed to arrest anybody landing."

Ronny snapped, "We're to be taken immediately to United Planets headquarters."

"Well, I don't know about that. I don't take orders from foreigners."

One of his men was nervously fingering the trigger of his submachine gun.

Ronny's mouth went dry. He had the feeling of being high, high on a rock face, inadequately belayed from above.

Tog said smoothly, "But, major, I'm sure whoever issued your orders had no expectation of a special delegation from the United Planets coming to congratulate your new authorities on their success. Of course, it's unknown to arrest a delegation from United Planets."

"It is?" he frowned at her. "I mean, you are?"

"Yes," Tog said sweetly.

Ronny took the hint. "Where can we find a vehicle, major, to get us to the capital and to United Planets headquarters? Evidently we arrived before we were expected. There should have been a big welcoming committee here."

"Oh," the obviously recently promoted lad said hesitantly. "Well, I suppose we can make arrangements. This way please." He grinned at Tog as they walked toward the administration building. "Do all girls dress like you on Earth?"

"Well, no," she said demurely.

"That's too bad," he said gallantly.

"Why, major!" Tog said, keeping her eyes on the tarmac.

At the administration building there was little of order, but eventually they managed to arrange for their transportation. Luckily, they were supplied with a chauffeur driven helio-car.

Luckily, because without the chauffeur to help them run the gauntlet they would have been held up by parades, demonstrations and monstrous street meetings a dozen times before they ever reached their destination. Twice, Ronny stopped short of drawing his gun only by a fraction when half drunken demonstrators stopped them.

The driver, a wispy, sad looking type, shook his head. "There's no going back now," he told them over his shoulder. "No going back. Last week I was all with the rest, I never did believe David the One was really Immortal. But you was just used to the idea, see? It'd always been that way, with the priests running everything and we was used to it. Now I wish we was still that way. At least you knew how you stood, see? Now, what's going to happen?"

"That's an interesting question," Tog said politely.

Ronny said, "Possibly you'll have the chance to build a better world, now."

The driver shot a contemptuous look over his shoulder. "Better world? What do I want with a better world? I just don't want to be bothered. I've been getting my three squares a day, got a nice little flat for my family. How do I know it's not going to be a worse world?"

"That's always a possibility," Tog told him. "Do most people seem to feel the same?"

"Practically everybody I know does," he said glumly. "But the fat's in the fire now. The priests are trying to hold on but their government is falling apart all over the place."

"Well," Ronny said, "at least you can figure just about anything in the way of a new government will be better than one based on superstition and inquisition. It couldn't get worse."

"Things can always get worse," the other contradicted him sadly.

* * * *

They left the cab before an impressively tall, many windowed building in city center. As they mounted the steps, Ronny frowned at her. "You seemed to be encouraging that man in his pessimism. So far as I can see, the best thing that ever happened to this planet was toppling that phony priesthood."

"Perhaps," she said agreeably. "However, the man's mind was an ossified one. A surprisingly large percentage of people have them, especially when it comes to institutions such as religion and government. We weren't going to be able to teach him anything, but it was possible to learn from him."

Ronny grunted his disgust. "What could we possibly learn from him?"

Tog said mildly, "We could learn what people of the street were thinking. It might give us some ideas about what direction the new government will take."

They approached the portals of the building and were halted by an armed Space Forces guard of half a dozen men. Their sergeant saluted, taking in their obvious other-planet clothing.

"Identifications, please," he said briskly.

They showed their badges and were passed on through. Ronny said to him, "Much trouble, sergeant?"

The other shrugged. "No. Just precautions, sir. We've been here only three or four weeks. Civil disturbance. We're used to it. Were over on Montezuma two basic months ago. Now there was *real* trouble. Had to shoot our way out."

Tog called, "Coming Ronny? I have this elevator waiting."

He followed her, scowling. An idea was trying to work its way through. Somehow he missed getting it.

Headquarters of the Department of Justice were on the eighth floor. A receptionist clerk led them through three or four doors to the single office which housed Section G.

A red eyed, exhausted agent looked up from the sole desk and snarled a question at them. Ronny didn't get it, but Tog said mildly, "Probationary Agent Ronald Bronston and Tog Lee Chang Chu. On special assignment." She flicked open her badge so that the other could see it.

His manner changed. "Sorry," he said, getting up to shake hands. "I'm Mouley Hassan, in charge of Section G on New Delos. We've just had a crisis here, as you can imagine. The worst of it's now over." He added sourly, "I hope. All my assistants have already taken off for Avalon." He was a short

statured, dark complected man, his features betraying his Semitic background.

Ronny shook hands with him and said, "Sorry to bother you at a time like this."

They found chairs and Mouley Hassan flicked a key on his order box and said to them, "How about a drink? They make a wonderful sparkling wine on this planet. Trust any theocracy to have top potables."

Ronny accepted the offer, Tog refused it politely. She sat demurely, her hands in her lap.

Mouley Hassan ran a weary hand through already mussed hair. "What's this special assignment you're on?"

Ronny said, "Commissioner Metaxa has sent me looking for Tommy Paine."

"Tommy Paine!" the other blurted. "At a time like this, when I haven't had three nights' sleep in the last three basic weeks, you come around looking for Tommy Paine?"

Ronny was taken aback. "Sid Jakes seemed to think this might be one of Paine's jobs."

Tog said mildly, "What better place to look for Tommy Paine, than in a situation like this, Agent Hassan?" Her eyebrows went up. "Or don't you think the quest for Paine is an important one?"

The other subsided somewhat. "I suppose you're right," he said. "I'm deathly tired. Do whatever you want. But don't expect much from me."

Tog said, just a trifle tartly, Ronny thought, "We'll have to call on you, as usual, Agent Hassan. There's probably no single job in Section G more important than the pursuit of Tommy Paine."

"All right, all right," Mouley Hassan admitted. "I'll co-operate. How long have you been away from Earth?" he said to Ronny.

"About one basic week."

"Oh," he grunted. "This is your first stop, eh? Well, I don't envy you your job." He brought a cool bottle from a delivery drawer in the desk along with two glasses. "Here's the wine."

Ronny leaned forward to accept the glass. "This situation here," he said, "do you think it can be laid to Paine?"

Mouley Hassan shrugged wearily. "I don't know."

Ronny sipped the drink, looking at the tired agent over the glass rim. "From what we understand, check has been kept on all persons leaving the planet since the bombing."

"Check is right. There's only one ship that took off and it carried nobody except my assistants. If you ask me, I still needed them, but some brass hat back on Earth decided they were more necessary over on Avalon." He was disgusted.

Ronny put the glass down. "You mean only one ship's left this planet since the God-King was killed?"

"That's right. It was like pulling teeth to get the visas."

"How many men aboard?"

Mouley Hassan looked at him speculatively. "Four-man crew and six Section G operatives."

Tog said brightly, "Why, that means, then, that either Tommy Paine is still on this planet, or he's one of the passengers or crew members of that ship." She added, "That is, of course, unless he had a private craft, hidden away somewhere."

Ronny slumped back into his chair as some of the ramifications came home to him. "If it was Tommy Paine at all," he said.

Mouley Hassan nodded. "That's always a point." He finished his glass and looked pleadingly at Tog. "Look, I have work. If I can finish some of it, I might have time for some sleep. Couldn't we postpone the search for Tommy Paine."

Tog said nothing to him.

Ronny came to his feet. "We'll get along. A couple of ideas occur to me. I'll check with you later."

"Fine," the agent said. He shook hands with them again. He said, somehow more to Tog than to Ronny, "I know how important your job is. It's just that I've been pushed to the point where I can't operate efficiently."

She smiled her understanding, gave him her small, delicate hand.

In the elevator, Ronny said to her, "Why should this sort of thing particularly affect Section G?"

Tog said, "It's times like this that planets drop out of the UP. Or, possibly, get into the hands of some jingoistic military group and start off halfcocked to provoke a war with some other planet, or to missionarize or propagandize it." She thought about it a moment. "A new revolution, in government or religion, seems almost invariably to want to spread the light. An absolute compulsion to bring to others the new truths that they've found." She added, her voice holding a trace of mockery, "Usually the new truths are rather hoary ones, and there are few interested in hearing them."

* * * *

They spent their first day in getting accommodations in a centrally located hotel, in making arrangements, through the Department of Justice, for the local means of exchange—it

turned out to be coinage, based on gold—and getting the feel of their surroundings.

Evidently Delos, the capital city of the planet New Delos, was but slowly emerging from the chaos that had taken over on the assassination. A provisional government, composed of representatives of half a dozen different organizations which had sprung up like mushrooms following the collapse of the regime, had assumed power. Elections had been promised and were to be brought off when arrangements could be made.

Meanwhile, the actual government was still largely in the hands of the lower echelons of the priesthood. A nervous priesthood it was, seemingly desirous of getting out from under while the going was good, afraid of being held responsible for former excesses.

Ronny Bronston, high hopes still in his head, looked up the Sub-Bishop who had given them landing orders while they were still aboard the Space Forces cruiser. Tog was off making arrangements for various details involved in their being in Delos in its time of crisis.

A dozen times, on his way over to keep his appointment with the official, Ronny had to step into doorways, or in other wise make himself inconspicuous. Gangs of demonstrators roamed the street, some of them drunken, looking for trouble, and scornful of police or the military. Twice, when it looked as though he might be roughed up, Ronny drew his gun and held it in open sight, ready for use, but not threateningly. The demonstrators made off.

His throat was dry by the time he reached his destination. The life of a Section G agent, on interplanetary assignment, had its drawbacks.

The Sub-Bishop had formerly been in charge of Interplanetary Communications which involved commerce as well as intercourse with United Planets. It must have been an ultra-responsible position only a month ago. Now his offices were all but deserted.

He looked at Ronny's badge, only vaguely interested. "Section G of the Bureau of Investigation," he said. "I don't believe I am aware of your responsibilities. However," he nodded with sour courtesy, "please be seated. You must forgive my lack of ability to offer refreshment. Isn't there an old tradition about rats deserting a sinking ship? I am afraid my former assistants had rodentlike instincts."

Ronny said, "Section G deals with Interplanetary Security, sir—"

"I am addressed as Holiness," the other said.

Ronny looked at him. "Sorry," he said. "I am a citizen of the United Planets, not any one planet, even Earth. UP citizens have complete religious freedom. In my case I am unaffiliated with any church."

The Sub-Bishop let it pass. He said sourly, "I am afraid that even here on New Delos, I am seldom honoured by my title any more. Go on, you say you deal with Interplanetary Security."

"That's correct. In cases like this we're interested in checking to see if there is any possibility that citizens of planets other than New Delos are involved in your internal affairs."

The other's eyes were suddenly slits. He said, heavily, "You suspect that David the One was assassinated by an alien?"

Ronny had to tread carefully here. "I make no such suggestion. I am merely here to check on the possibility. If such was the case, my duty would be to arrest the man, or men."

"If we got hold of him, you'd have small chance of asserting your authority," the priest growled. "What did you want to know?"

"I understand that no interplanetary craft have left New Delos since the assassination."

"None except a United Planets ship which was carefully inspected."

Ronny said tightly, "But what facilities do you have to check on secret spaceports, possibly located in some remote desert or mountain area?"

The New Delian laughed sourly. "There is no other planet in all the United Planets with our degree of security. We even imported the most recent developments in artificial satellites equipped with the most delicate of detection devices. I assure you, it is utterly impossible for a spacecraft to land or take off from New Delos without our knowledge."

Ronny Bronston's eyes lit with excitement. "These security measures of yours. To what extent do you keep under observation all aliens on the planet?"

The priest's chuckle had a nasty quality. "You are quite ignorant of our institutions, evidently. Every person on New Delos, in every way of life, was under constant survey from the cradle to the grave. Aliens were highly discouraged. When they appeared on New Delos at all, they were restricted in their movements to this, our capital city."

Ronny let air whistle from his lungs. "Then," he said triumphantly, "if any alien had anything to do with this, he is still on the planet. Can you get me a list of all aliens?"

The other laughed again, still sourly. "But there are none. None except you employees of United Planets. I'm afraid you're on a wild-goose chase."

Ronny stared at him blankly. "But commercial representatives, cultural exchange—"

The priest said flatly, "No. None at all. All commerce was handled through UP. We encouraged no cultural exchanges. We wished to keep our people uncorrupted. United Planets alone had the right to land on our one spaceport."

The Section G agent came to his feet. This was much simpler than he could ever have hoped for. He thanked the other, but avoided the necessity of shaking hands, and left.

* * * *

He found a helio-cab and dialed it to the UP building, finding strange the necessity of slipping coins into the vehicle's slots until the correct amount for his destination had been deposited. Coinage was no longer in use on Earth.

At the UP building he retraced his steps of the day before to the single office of Section G.

To his surprise, not only Mouley Hassan was there, but Tog as well. Hassan had evidently had at least a few hours of sleep. He was in better shape.

They exchanged the usual amenities and took their chairs again.

Hassan said, "We were just gossiping. It's been years since I've been in Greater Washington. Lee Chang tells me that Sid Jakes is now a Supervisor. I worked with him for a while, when I first joined Section G. How about a glass of wine?"

Ronny said, "Look. If Tommy Paine was connected with this, and it's almost positive he was, we've got him."

The others looked at him.

"You've evidently been busy," Tog said mildly.

He turned to her. "He's trapped, Tog! He can't get off the planet."

Mouley Hassan rubbed a hand through his hair. "It'd be hard, all right. They've got the people under rein here such as you've never seen before. Or they did until this blew up."

Ronny sketched the situation to Tog, winding up with, "The only thing that makes sense is that it's a Tommy Paine job. The local citizens would never have been able to get their hands on such a bomb, or been able to have made the arrangements for its delivery. They're under too much surveillance."

Tog said thoughtfully, "but how did he escape all this surveillance?"

"Don't you understand? He's working here, in this building, as an employee of UP. There is no other alternative."

They stared at him.

"I think perhaps you're right," Tog said finally.

Ronny turned to Mouley Hassan. "Can you get a list of all UP employees?"

"Of course." He flicked his order box, barked a command into it.

Ronny said, "It's going to be a matter of eliminating the impossible. For instance, what is the earliest known case of Tommy Paine's activity?"

Tog thought back. "So far as we know definitely, about twenty-two years ago."

"Fine," Ronny said, increasingly excited. "That will eliminate all persons less than, say, forty years of age. We can assume he was at least twenty when he began."

Hassan said, "Can we eliminate all women employees?"

Ronny said, "I'd think so. The few times he's been seen, all reports are of a man. And that case on the planet Mother

where he put himself over as a Holy Man. He could hardly have been a woman in disguise in a Stone Age culture such as that."

Hassan said, "And this Tommy Paine has been flitting around this part of the galaxy for years, so anyone who has been here steadily for a period of even a couple of years or so, can't be suspect."

Mouley Hassan thrust his hand into a delivery drawer and brought forth a handful of punched cards, possibly fifty in all.

"Surely there's more people than that working in this building," Ronny protested.

Mouley Hassan said, "No. I've eliminated already everyone who is a citizen of New Delos. Obviously, Tommy Paine is an alien. We have only forty-eight Earthlings and other United Planets citizens working here."

He carried the cards to a small collator and worked for a moment on its controls, as Tog and Ronny watched him with mounting tension. "Let's see," he muttered. "We eliminate all women, all those less than forty, all who haven't done a great deal of travel, those who have been here for several years."

The end of it was that they eliminated everyone employed in the UP building.

The cards were stacked back on Mouley Hassan's desk again, and the three of them sat around and looked glumly at them.

Ronny said, "He's tinkered with the files. He counterfeited fake papers for himself, or something. Possibly he's pulled his own card and it isn't in this stack you have."

Mouley Hassan said, "We'll double-check all those possibilities, but you're wrong. Possibly a few hundred years ago, but not today. Forgery and counterfeiting are things of the past. And, believe me, the Bureau of Investigation and especially

Section G, may look on the slipshod side, but they aren't. We're not going to find anything wrong with those cards. Tommy Paine simply is not working for UP on New Delos."

"Then," Ronny said, "there's only one alternative. He's on this UP ship going to, what was the name of its destination?"

"Avalon," Mouley Hassan said, his face thoughtful.

Tog said, "Do you have any ideas on the men aboard?"

Mouley Hassan said, "There were four crew men, and six of our agents."

Tog said, "Unless one of them has faked papers, the six agents are eliminated. That leaves the crew members. Do you know anything about them?"

Hassan shook his head.

Ronny said, "Let's communicate with Avalon. Tell our representatives there to be sure that none of the occupants of that ship leaves Avalon until we get there."

Mouley Hassan said, "Good idea." He turned to his screen and said into it, "Section G, Bureau of Investigation, on the Planet Avalon."

In moment the screen lit up. An elderly agent, as Section G agents seemed to go, looked up at them.

Mouley Hassan held his silver badge so the other could see it and on the Avalon agent's nod said, "I'm Hassan from New Delos. We've just had a crisis here and there seems to be a chance that it's a Tommy Paine job. Agent Bronston here is on an assignment tracking him down. I'll turn it over to Bronston."

The Avalon agent nodded again, and looked at Ronny.

Ronny said urgently, "We haven't the time to give you details, but every indication is that Paine is on a UP spacecraft

with Avalon as its destination. There are only ten men aboard, and six of them are Section G operatives.”

The other pursed his lips. “I see. You think you have the old fox cornered, eh?”

“Possibly,” Ronny said. “There are various ifs. Miss Tog and I can double check here. Then as soon as we can clear exit visas, we’ll make immediate way for Avalon.”

The Avalon Section G agent said, “I haven’t the authority to control the movements of other agents, they have as high rank as I have,” he added, expressionlessly, “and probably higher than yours.”

Ronny said, “But the four-man crew?”

The other said, “These men are coming to Avalon to work on a job that will take at least six months. We’ll make a routine check, and I’ll try and make sure the whole ten will still be on Avalon when and if you arrive.”

They had to be satisfied with that. They checked all ways from the middle, nor did it take long. There was no doubt. If this was a Tommy Paine job, and it almost surely was, then there was only one way in which he could have escaped from the planet and that was by the single spacecraft that had left, destination Avalon. He was not on the planet, that was definite Ronny felt. A stranger on New Delos was as conspicuous as a walrus in a goldfish bowl. There simply were no such.

They spent most of their time checking and rechecking United Planets personnel, but there was no question there either.

Mouley Hassan and others of UP personnel helped cut the red tape involved in getting exit visas from New Delos. It wasn’t as complicated as it might have been a week or two before. No one seemed to be so confident of his authority in the

new provisional government that he dared veto a United Planets request.

Mouley Hassan was able to arrange for a small space yacht, slower than a military craft, but capable of getting them to Avalon in a few days time. A one-man crew was sufficient, Ronny, and especially Tog, could spell him on the watches.

Time aboard was spent largely in studying up on Avalon, going over and over again anything known about the elusive Tommy Paine, and playing Battle Chess and bickering with Tog Lee Chang Chu.

If it hadn't been for this ability to argue against just about anything Ronny managed to say, he could have been attracted to her to the detriment of the job. She was a good traveler, few people are; she was an ultra-efficient assistant; she was a joy to look at; and she never intruded. But, Great Guns, the woman could bicker.

The two of them were studying in the ship's luxurious lounge when Ronny looked up and said, "Do you have any idea why those six agents were sent to Avalon?"

"No," she said.

He indicated the booklet he was reading. "From what I can see here, it sounds like one of the most advanced planets in the UP. They've made some of the most useful advances in industrial techniques of the past century."

"Oh, I don't know," Tog mused. "I haven't much regard for Industrial Feudalism myself. It starts off with a bang, but tends to go sterile."

"Industrial feudalism," he said indignantly. "What do you mean? The government is a constitutional monarchy with the king merely a powerless symbol. The standard of living is high.

Elections are honest and democratic. They've got a three-party system...."

"Which is largely phony," Tog interrupted. "You've got to do some reading between the lines, especially when the books you're reading are turned out by the industrial feudalistic publishing companies in Avalon."

"What's this industrial feudalism, you keep talking about? Avalon has a system of free enterprise."

"A gobbledygook term," Tog said, irritatingly. "Industrial feudalism is a socio-economic system that develops when industrial wealth is concentrated into the hands of a comparatively few families. It finally gets to the point of a closed circle all but impossible to break into. These industrial feudalistic families become so powerful that only in rare instances can anyone lift himself into their society. They dominate every field, including the so-called labor unions, which amount to one of the biggest businesses of all. With their unlimited resources they even own every means of dispensing information."

"You mean," Ronny argued, "that on Avalon you can't start up a newspaper of your own and say whatever you wish?"

"Certainly you can, theoretically. If you have the resources. Unfortunately, such enterprises become increasingly expensive to start. Or you could start a radio, TV or Tri-Di station—if you had the resources. However, even if you overcame all your handicaps and your newspaper or broadcasting station became a success, the industrial feudalistic families in control of Avalon's publishing and broadcasting fields have the endless resources to buy you out, or squeeze you out, by one nasty means or another."

Ronny snorted. "Well, the people must be satisfied or they'd vote some fundamental changes."

Tog nodded. "They're satisfied, and no wonder. Since childhood every means of forming their opinions have been in the hands of industrial feudalistic families—including the schools."

"You mean the schools are private?"

"No, they don't have to be. The government is completely dominated by the fifty or so families which for all practical purposes own Avalon. That includes the schools. Some of the higher institutions of learning are private, but they, too, are largely dependent upon grants from the families."

* * * *

Ronny was irritated by her know-all air. He tapped the book he'd been reading with a finger. "They don't control the government. Avalon's got a three-party system. Any time the people don't like the government, they can vote in an alternative."

"That's an optical illusion. There are three parties, but each is dominated by the fifty families, and election laws are such that for all practical purposes it's impossible to start another party. Theoretically it's possible, actually it isn't. The voters can vary back and forth between the three political parties but it doesn't make any difference which one they elect. They all stand for the same thing—a continuation of the status quo."

"Then you claim it isn't democracy at all?"

Tog sighed. "That's a much abused word. Actually, pure democracy is seldom seen. They pretty well had it in primitive society where government was based on the family. You voted for one of your relatives in your clan to represent you in the tribal councils. Every one in the tribe was equal so far as apportionments of the necessities of life were concerned. No one, even the tribal chiefs, ate better than anyone else, no one had a better home."

Ronny said, snappishly, "And if man had remained at that level, we'd never have gotten anywhere."

"That's right," she said. "For progress, man needed a leisure class. Somebody with the time to study, to experiment, to work things out."

He said, "We're getting away from the point. You said in spite of appearances they don't have democracy on Avalon."

"They have a pretense of it. But only free men can practice democracy. So long as your food, clothing and shelter are controlled by someone else, you aren't free. Wait until I think of an example." She put her right forefinger to her chin, thoughtfully.

Holy smokes, she was a cute trick. If only she wasn't so confounded irritating.

Tog said, "Do you remember the State of California in Earth history?"

"I think so. On the west coast of North America."

"That's right. Well, back in the Twentieth Century, Christian calendar, they had an economic depression. During it a crackpot organization called Thirty Dollars Every Thursday managed to get itself on the ballot. Times were bad enough but had this particular bunch got into power it would have become chaotic. At first no thinking person took them seriously, however a majority of people in California at that time had little to lose and in the final week or so of the election campaign the polls showed that Thirty Dollars Every Thursday was going to win. So, a few days before voting many of the larger industries and businesses in the State ran full page ads in the newspapers. They said substantially the same thing. *If Thirty Dollars Every Thursday wins this election, our concern will close its doors. Do not bother to come back to work Monday.*"

Ronny was scowling at her. "What's your point?"

She shrugged delicate shoulders. "The crackpots were defeated, of course, which was actually good for California. But my point is that the voters of California were not actually free since their livelihoods were controlled by others. This is an extreme case, of course, but the fact always applies."

A thought suddenly hit Ronny Bronston. "Look," he said. "Tommy Paine. Do you think he's merely escaping from New Delos, or is it possible that Avalon is his next destination? Is he going to try and overthrow the government there?"

She was shaking her head, but frowning. "I don't think so. Things are quite stable on Avalon."

"Stable?" he scowled at her. "From what you've been saying, they're pretty bad."

She continued to shake her head. "Don't misunderstand, Ronny. On an assignment like this, it's easy to get the impression that all the United Planets are in a state of socio-political confusion, but it isn't so. A small minority of planets are ripe for the sort of trouble Tommy Paine stirs up. Most are working away, developing, making progress, slowly evolving. Avalon is one of these. The way things are there, Tommy Paine couldn't make a dent on changing things, even if he wanted to, and there's no particular reason to believe he does."

Ronny growled. "From what I can learn of the guy he's anxious to stir up trouble wherever he goes."

"I don't know. If there's any pattern at all in his activities, it seems to be that he picks spots where things are ripe to boil over on their own. He acts as a catalyst. In a place like Avalon he wouldn't get to first base. Possibly fifty years from now, things will have developed on Avalon to the point where there is dissatisfaction. By that time," she said dryly, "we'll assume

Tommy Paine will no longer be a problem to the Commissariat of Interplanetary Affairs for one reason or the other.”

Ronny took up his book again. He growled, “I can’t figure out his motivation. If I could just put my finger on that.”

For once she agreed with him. “I’ve got an idea, Ronny, that once you have that, you’ll have Tommy Paine.”

* * * * *

They drew blank on Avalon.

Or, at least, it was drawn for them before they ever arrived.

The Section G agent permanently assigned to that planet had already checked and double checked the possibilities. None of the four-man crew of the UP spacecraft had been on New Delos at the time of the assassination of the God-King. They, and their craft, had been light-years away on another job.

Ronny Bronston couldn’t believe it. He simply couldn’t believe it.

The older agent, his name was Jheru Bulchand, was definite. He went over it with Ronny and Tog in a bar adjoining UP headquarters. He had dossiers on each of the ten men, detailed dossiers. On the face of it, none of them could be Paine.

“But one of them has to be,” Ronny pleaded. He explained their method of eliminating the forty-eight employees of UP on New Delos.

Bulchand shrugged. “You’ve got holes in that method of elimination. You’re assuming Tommy Paine is an individual, and you have no reason to. My own theory is that it’s an organization.”

Ronny said unhappily, “Then you’re of the opinion that there is a Tommy Paine?”

The older agent was puffing comfortably on an old style briar pipe. He nodded definitely. "I believe Tommy Paine exists as an organization. Possibly once, originally, it was a single person, but now it's a group. How large, I wouldn't know. Probably not too large or by this time somebody would have betrayed it, or somebody would have cracked and we would have caught them. Catch one and you've got the whole organization what with our modern means of interrogation."

Tog said, "I've heard the opinion before."

Jheru Bulchand pointed at Ronny with his pipe stem. "If its an organization, then none of that eliminating you did is valid. Your assassin could have been one of the women. He could have been one of the men you eliminated as too young—someone recently admitted to the Tommy Paine organization."

Ronny checked the last of his theories. "Why did Section G send six of its agents here?"

"Nothing to do with Tommy Paine," Bulchand said. "It's a different sort of crisis."

"Just for my own satisfaction, what kind of crisis?"

Bulchand sketched it quickly. "There are two Earth type planets in this solar system. Avalon was the first to be colonized and developed rapidly. After a couple of centuries, Avalonians went over and settled on Catalina. They eventually set up a government of their own. Now Avalon has a surplus of industrial products. Her economic system is such that she produces more than she can sell back to her own people. There's a glut."

Tog said demurely, "So, of course, they want to dump it in Catalina."

Bulchand nodded. "In fact, they're willing to give it away. They've offered to build railroads, turn over ships and aircraft,

donate whole factories to Catalina's slowly developing economy."

Ronny said, "Well, how does that call for Section G agents?"

"Catalina has evoked Article Two of the UP Charter. No member planet of UP is to interfere with the internal political, socio-economic or religious affairs of another member planet. Avalon claims the Charter doesn't apply since Catalina belongs to the same solar system and since she's a former colony. We're trying to smooth the whole thing over, before Avalon dreams up some excuse for military action."

Ronny stared at him. "I get the feeling every other sentence is being left out of your explanation. It just doesn't make sense. In the first place, why is Avalon as anxious as all that to give away what sounds like a fantastic amount of goods?"

"I told you, they have a glut. They've overproduced and, as a result, they've got a king-size depression on their hands, or will have unless they find markets."

"Well, why not trade with some of the planets that want her products?"

Tog said as though reasoning with a youngster, "Planets outside her own solar system are too far away for it to be practical even if she had commodities they didn't. She needs a nearby planet more backward than herself, a planet like Catalina."

"Well, that brings us to the more fantastic question. Why in the world doesn't Catalina accept? It sounds to me like pure philanthropy on the part of Avalon."

Bulchand was wagging his pipe stem in a negative gesture. "Bronston, governments are never motivated by idealistic reasons. Individuals might be, and even small groups, but govern-

ments never. Governments, including that of Avalon, exist for the benefit of the class or classes that control them. The only things that motivate them are the interests of that class.”

“Well, this sounds like an exception,” Ronny said argumentatively. “How can Catalina lose if the Avalonians grant them railroads, factories and all the rest of it?”

Tog said, “Don’t you see, Ronny? It gives Avalon a foothold in the Catalina economy. When the locomotives wear out on the railroad, new engines, new parts, must be purchased. They won’t be available on Catalina because there will be no railroad industry because none will have ever grown up. Catalina manufacturers couldn’t compete with that initial free gift. They’ll be dependent on Avalon for future equipment. In the factories, when machines wear out, they will be replaceable only with the products of Avalon’s industry.”

Bulchand said, “There’s an analogy in the early history of the United States. When its fledgling steel industry began, they set up a high tariff to protect it against British competition. The British were amazed and indignant, pointing out that they could sell American steel products at one third the local prices, if only allowed to do so. The United States said no thanks, it didn’t want to be tied, industrially, to Great Britain’s apron strings. And in a couple of decades American steel production passed England’s. In a couple of more decades American steel production was many times that of England’s and she was taking British markets away from her all over the globe.”

“At any rate,” Ronny said, “it’s not a Tommy Paine matter.”

Just for luck, though, Ronny and Tog double checked all over again on Bulchand’s efforts. They interviewed all six of the Section G agents. Each of them carried a silver badge that gleamed only for the individual who possessed it. All of which

eliminated the possibility that Paine had assumed the identity of a Section G operative. So that was out.

They checked the four crew members, but there was no doubt there, either. The craft had been far away at the time of the assassination on New Delos.

On the third day, Ronny Bronston, disgusted, knocked on the door of Tog's hotel room. The door screen lit up and Tog, looking out at him said, "Oh, come on in, Ronny, I was just talking to Earth."

He entered.

Tog had set up her Section G communicator on a desk top and Sid Jakes' grinning face was in the tiny, brilliant screen. Ronny approached close enough for the other to take him in.

Jakes said happily, "Hi, Ronny, no luck, eh?"

Ronny shook his head, trying not to let his face portray his feelings of defeat. This after all was a probationary assignment, and the supervisor had the power to send Ronny Bronston back to the drudgery of his office job at Population Statistics.

"Still working on it. I suppose it's a matter of returning to New Delos and grinding away at the forty-eight employees of the UP there."

Sid Jakes pursed his lips. "I don't know. Possibly this whole thing was a false alarm. At any rate, there seems to be a hotter case on the fire. If our local agents have it straight, Paine is about to pull one of his coups on Kropotkin. This is a top-top-secret, of course, one of the few times we've ever detected him before the act."

Ronny was suddenly alert, his fatigue of disgust of but a moment ago, completely forgotten. "Where?" he said.

"Kropotkin," Jakes said. "One of the most backward planets in UP and seemingly a setup for Paine's sort of trouble making.

The authorities, if you can use the term applied to Kropotkin, are already complaining, threatening to invoke Article One of the Charter, or to resign from UP.” Jake looked at Tog again. “Do you know Kropotkin, Lee Chang?”

She shook her head. “I’ve heard of it, rather vaguely. Named after some old anarchist, I believe.”

“That’s the place. One of the few anarchist societies in UP. You don’t hear much from them.” He turned to Ronny again. “I think that’s your bet. Hop to it, boy. We’re going to catch this Tommy Paine guy, or organization, or whatever, soon or United Planets is going to know it. We can’t keep the lid on indefinitely. If word gets around of his activities, then we’ll lose member planets like Christmas trees shedding needles after New Year’s.” He grinned widely. “That’s sounds like a neat trick, eh?”

* * * *

Ronny Bronston had got to the point where he avoided controversial subjects with Tog even when provoked and she had a sneaky little way of provoking arguments. They had only one really knock down and drag-out verbal battle on the way to Kropotkin.

It had started innocently enough after dinner on the space liner on which they had taken passage for the first part of the trip. To kill time they were playing Battle Chess with its larger board and added contingents of pawns and castles.

Ronny said idly, “You know, in spite of the fact that I’m a third generation United Planets citizen and employee, I’m just beginning to realize how far out some of our member planets are. I had no idea before.”

She frowned in concentration, before moving. She was advancing her men in echelon attack, taking losses in exchange for territory and trying to pen him up in such small space that he couldn't maneuver.

She said, "How do you mean?"

Ronny lifted and dropped a shoulder. "Well, New Delos and its theocracy, for instance, and Shangri-La and Mother and some of the other planets with extremes in government of socio-economic system. I hadn't the vaguest idea about such places."

She made a deprecating sound. "You should see Amazonia, or, for that matter, the Orwellian State."

"*Amazonia*," he said, "does that mean what it sounds like it does?"

She made her move and settled back in satisfaction. Her pawns were in such position that his bishops were both unusable. He'd tried to play a phalanx game in the early stages of her attack, but she'd broken through, rolling up his left flank after sacrificing a castle and a knight.

"Certainly does," she said. "A fairly recently colonized planet. A few thousand feminists no men at all—moved onto it a few centuries ago. And it's still an out and out matriarchy."

Ronny cleared his throat delicately. "Without men...ah, how did they continue several centuries?"

Tog suppressed her amusement. "Artificial insemination, at first, so I understand. They brought their, ah, supply with them. But then there were boys among the first generation on the new planet and even the Amazonians weren't up to cold bloodedly butchering their children. So they merely enslaved them. Nice girls."

Ronny stared at her. "You mean all men are automatically slaves on this planet?"

"That's right."

Ronny made an improperly thought out move, trying to bring up a castle to reinforce his collapsing flank. He said, "UP allows *anybody* to join evidently," and there was disgust in his voice.

"Why not?" she said mildly.

"Well, there should be *some* standards."

Tog moved quickly, dominating with a knight several squares he couldn't afford to lose. She looked up at him, her dark eyes sparking. "The point of UP is to include all the planets. That way at least conflict can be avoided and some exchange of science, industrial techniques and cultural gains take place. And you must remember that while in power practically no socio-economic system will admit to the fact that it could possibly change for the better. But actually there is nothing less stable. Socio-economic systems are almost always in a condition of flux. Planets such as Amazonia might for a time seem so brutal in their methods as to exclude their right to civilized intercourse with the rest. However, one of these days there'll be a change—or one of these centuries. They all change, sooner or later." She added softly, "Even Han."

"Han?" Ronny said.

Her voice was quiet. "Where I was born, Ronny. Colonized from China in the very early days. In fact, I spent my childhood in a commune." She said musingly, "The party bureaucrats thought their system an impregnable, unchangeable one. Your move."

Ronny was fascinated. "And what happened?" He was in full retreat now, and with nowhere to go, his pieces pinned up for

the slaughter. He moved a pawn to try and open up his queen.

"Why don't you concede?" she said. "Tommy Paine happened."

"Paine!"

"Uh-huh. It's a long story. I'll tell you about it some time." She pressed closer with her own queen.

He stared disgustedly at the board. "Well, that's what I mean," he muttered. "I had no idea there were so many varieties of crackpot politico-economic systems among the UP membership."

"They're not necessarily crackpot," she protested mildly. "Just at different stages of development."

"Not crackpot!" he said. "Here we are heading for a planet named Kropotkin which evidently practices anarchy."

"Your move," she said. "What's wrong with anarchism?"

He glowered at her, in outraged disgust. Was it absolutely impossible for him to say anything without her disagreement?

Tog said mildly, "The anarchistic ethic is one of the highest man has ever developed." She added, after a moment of pretty consideration. "Unfortunately, admittedly, it hasn't been practical to put to practice. It will be interesting to see how they have done on Kropotkin."

"Anarchist ethic, yes," Ronny snapped. "I'm no student of the movement but the way I understand it, there isn't any."

Tog smiled sweetly. "The belief upon which they base their teachings is that no man is capable of judging another."

Ronny cast his eyes ceilingward. "Okay, I give up!"

She began rapidly resetting the pieces. "Another game?" she said brightly.

"Hey! I didn't mean the game! I was just about to counterattack."

“Ha!” she said.

* * * *

The Section G agent on Kropotkin was named Hideka Yamamoto, but he was on a field tour and wouldn't be back for several days. However, there wasn't especially any great hurry so far as Ronny Bronston and Tog Lee Chang Chu knew. They got themselves organized in the rather rustic equivalent of a hotel, which was located fairly near UP headquarters, and took up the usual problems of arranging for local exchange, meals, means of transportation and such necessities.

It was a greater problem than usual. In fact, hadn't it been for the presence of the UP organization, which had already gone through all this the hard way, some of the difficulties would have been all but insurmountable.

For instance, there was no local exchange. There was no medium of exchange at all. Evidently simple barter was the rule.

In the hotel—if it could be called a hotel—lobby, Ronny Bronston looked at Tog. “Anarchism!” he said. “Oh, great. The highest ethic of all. And what's the means of transportation on this wonderful planet? The horse. And how are we going to get a couple of horses with no means of exchange?”

She tinkled laughter.

“All right,” he said. “You're the Man Friday. You find out the details and handle them. I'm going out to take a look around the town—if you can call this a town.”

“It's the capital of Kropotkin,” Tog said placatingly, though with a mocking background in her tone. “Name of Bakunin. And very pleasant, too, from what little I've seen. Not a bit of smog, industrial fumes, street dirt, street noises—”

“How could there be?” he injected disgustedly. “There isn’t any industry, there aren’t any cars, and for all practical purposes, no streets. The houses are a quarter of a mile or so apart.”

She laughed at him again. “City boy,” she said. “Go on out there and enjoy nature a little. It’ll do you good. Anybody who has cooped himself up in that one big city, Earth, all his life ought to enjoy seeing what the great outdoors looks like.”

He looked at her and grinned. She was cute as a pixie, and there were no two ways about that. He wondered for a moment what kind of a wife she’d make. And then shuddered inwardly. Life would be one big contradiction of anything he’d managed to get out of his trap.

He strolled idly along what was little more than a country path and it came to him that there were probably few worlds in the whole UP where he’d have been prone to do this within the first few hours he’d been on the planet. He would have been afraid, elsewhere, of anything from footpads to police, from unknown vehicles to unknown traffic laws. There was something bewildering about being an Earthling and being set down suddenly in New Delos or on Avalon.

Here, somehow, he already had a feeling of peace.

Evidently, although Bakunin was supposedly a city, its populace tilled their fields and provided themselves with their own food. He could see no signs of stores or warehouses. And the UP building, which was no great edifice itself, was the only thing in town which looked even remotely like a governmental building.

Bakunin was neat. Clean as a pin, as the expression went. Ronny was vaguely reminded of a historical Tri-Di romance

he'd once seen. It had been laid in ancient times in a community of the Amish in old Pennsylvania.

He approached one of the wooden houses. The things would have been priceless on Earth as an antique to be erected as a museum in some crowded park. For that matter it would have been priceless for the wood it contained. Evidently, the planet Kropotkin still had considerable virgin forest.

An old-timer smoking a pipe, sat on the cottage's front step. He nodded politely.

Ronny stopped. He might as well try to get a little of the feel of the place. He said courteously, "A pleasant evening."

The old-timer nodded. "As evenings should be after a fruitful day's toil. Sit down, comrade. You must be from the United Planets. Have you ever seen Earth?"

Ronny accepted the invitation and felt a soothing calm descend upon him almost immediately. An almost disturbingly pleasant calm. He said, "I was born on Earth."

"Ai?" the old man said. "Tell me. The books say that Kropotkin is an Earth type planet within what they call a few degrees. But is it? Is Kropotkin truly like the mother planet?"

Ronny looked about him. He'd seen some of this world as the shuttle rocket had brought them down from the passing liner. The forests, the lakes, the rivers, and the great sections untouched by man's hands. Now he saw the areas between homes, the neat fields, the signs of human toil—the toil of hands, not machines.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'm afraid not. This is how Earth must once have been. But no longer."

The other nodded. "Our total population is but a few million," he said. Then, "I would like to see the mother planet, but I suppose I never shall."

Ronny said diplomatically, "I have seen little of Kropotkin thus far but I am not so sure but that I might not be happy to stay here, rather than ever return to Earth."

The old man knocked the ashes from his pipe by striking it against the heel of a work-gnarled hand. He looked about him thoughtfully and said, "Yes, perhaps you're right. I am an old man and life has been good. I suppose I should be glad that I'll unlikely live to see Kropotkin change."

"Change? You plan changes?"

The old man looked at him and there seemed to be a very faint bitterness, politely suppressed. "I wouldn't say *we* planned them, comrade. Certainly not we of the older generation. But the trend toward change is already to be seen by anyone who wishes to look, and our institutions won't long be able to stand. But, of course, if you're from United Planets you would know more of this than I."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You are new indeed on Kropotkin," the old man said. "Just a moment." He went into his house and emerged with a small power pack. He indicated it to Ronny Bronston. "This is our destruction," he said.

The Section G agent shook his head, bewildered.

The old-timer sat down again. "My son," he said, "runs the farm now. Six months ago, he traded one of our colts for a small pump, powered by one of these. It was little use on my part to argue against the step. The pump eliminates considerable work at the well and in irrigation."

Ronny still didn't understand.

"The power pack is dead now," the old man said, "and my son needs a new one."

“They’re extremely cheap,” Ronny said. “An industrialized planet turns them out in multi-million amounts at practically no cost.”

“We have little with which to trade. A few handicrafts, at most.”

Ronny said, “But, good heavens, man, build yourselves a plant to manufacture power packs. With a population this small, a factory employing no more than half a dozen men could turn out all you need.”

The old man was shaking his head. He held up the battery. “This comes from the planet Archimedes,” he said, “one of the most highly industrialized in the UP, so I understand. On Archimedes do you know how many persons it takes to manufacture this power pack?”

* * * *

“A handful to operate the whole factory, Archimedes is fully automated.”

The old man was still moving his head negatively. “No. It takes the total working population of the planet. How many different metals do you think are contained in it, in all? I can immediately see what must be lead and copper.”

Ronny said uncomfortably, “Probably at least a dozen, some in microscopic amounts.”

“That’s right. So we need a highly developed metallurgical industry before we can even begin. Then a developed transportation industry to take metals to the factory. We need power to run the factory, hydro-electric, solar, or possibly atomic power. We need a tool-making industry to equip the factory, the transport industry and the power industry. And while the men are employed in these, we need farmers to produce food

for them, educators to teach them the sciences and techniques involved, and an entertainment industry to amuse them in their hours of rest. As their lives become more complicated with all this, we need a developed medical industry to keep them in health.”

The old man hesitated for a moment, then said, “And, above all, we need a highly complicated government to keep all this accumulation of wealth in check and balance. No. You see, my friend, it takes *social labor* to produce products such as this, and thus far we have avoided that on Kropotkin. In fact, it was for such avoidance that my ancestors originally came to this planet.”

Ronny said, scowling, “This gets ridiculous. You show me this basically simple power pack and say it will ruin your socio-economic system. On the face of it, it’s ridiculous.”

The old man sighed and looked out over the village unseeingly. “It’s not just that single item, of course. The other day one of my neighbors turned up with a light bulb with built-in power for a year’s time. It is the envy of the unthinking persons of the neighborhood most of whom would give a great deal for such a source of light. A nephew of mine has somehow even acquired a powered bicycle, I think you call them, from somewhere or other. One by one, item by item, these products of advanced technology turn up—from whence, we don’t seem to be able to find out.”

Under his breath, Ronny muttered, “*Paine!*”

“I beg your pardon,” the old man said.

“Nothing,” the Section G agent said. He leaned forward and, a worried frown working its way over his face, began to question the other more closely.

Afterwards, Ronny Bronston strode slowly toward the UP headquarters. There was only a small contingent of United Planets personnel on this little populated member planet but, as always, there seemed to be an office for Section G.

Ronny stood outside it for a moment. There were voices from within, but he didn't knock.

In fact, he cast his eyes up and down the short corridor. At the far end was a desk with a girl in the Interplanetary Cultural Exchange Department working away in concentration. She wasn't looking in his direction.

Ronny Bronston put his ear to the door. The building was primitive enough, rustic enough in its construction, to permit his hearing.

Tog Lee Chang Chu was saying seriously, "Oh, it was chaotic all right, but no, I don't really believe it could have been a Tommy Paine case. Actually I'd suggest to you that you run over to Catalina. When I was on Avalon I heard rumors that Tommy Paine's finger seemed to be stirring around in the mess there. Yes, I'd recommend that you take off for Catalina immediately. If Paine is anywhere in this vicinity at all, it would be Catalina."

For a moment, Ronny Bronston froze. Then in automatic reflex his hand went inside his jacket to rest over the butt of the Model H automatic there.

No, that wasn't the answer. His hand dropped away from the gun.

He listened, further.

Another voice was saying, "We thought we were on the trail for a while on Hector, but it turned out it wasn't Paine. Just a group of local agitators fed up with the communist regime there. There's going to be a blood bath on Hector, before

they're through, but it doesn't seem to be Paine's work this time."

Tog's voice was musing. "Well, you never know, it sounds like the sort of muck he likes to play in."

The strange voice said argumentatively, "Well, Hector *needs* a few fundamental changes."

"It could be," Tog said, "but that's their internal affairs, of course. Our job in Section G is to prevent troubles between the differing socio-economic and religious features of member planets. Whatever we think of some of the things Paine does, our task is to get him."

* * * * *

Ronny Bronston pushed the door open and went through. Tog Lee Chang Chu was sitting at a desk, nonchalant and pettily beautiful as usual, comfortably seated in easy-chairs were two young men by their attire probably citizens of United Planets and possibly even Earthlings.

"Hello, Ronny," Tog said softly. "Meet Frederic Lippman and Pedro Nazaré, both Section G operatives. This is my colleague, Ronald Bronston, gentlemen. Fredric and Pedro were just leaving, Ronny."

The two agents got up to shake hands.

Ronny said, "You can't be in that much of a hurry. What's your assignment, boys?"

Lippman, an earnest type, and by his appearance not more than twenty-five or so years of age, began to answer, but Nazaré said hurriedly, "Actually, it's a confidential assignment. We're working directly out of the Octagon."

Lippman said, frowning, "It's not that confidential, Tog. Bronston's an agent, too. What's your assignment, Ronny?"

Ronny said very slowly, "I'm beginning to suspect that it's the same as yours and various pieces are beginning to fall into place."

Lippman was taken aback. "You mean you're looking for Tommy Paine?" His eyes went to his associate. "How could that be, Tog? I didn't know more than one of us were on this job. Why, that means if Bronston here finds him first, I won't get my permanent appointment."

Ronny looked at Tog Lee Chang Chu who was sitting demurely, hands in lap, and a resigned expression on her face. He said, "Nor if you find him first, will I. Look here, Tog, how many men does Sid Jakes have out on this assignment?"

"I wouldn't know," she said mildly.

He snapped, "A few dozen or so? Or possibly a few hundred?"

"It seems unlikely there could be that many," she said mildly. She looked at the other two agents. "I think you two had better run along. Take my suggestion I made earlier."

"Wait a minute," Ronny snapped. "You mean that they go to Catalina? That's ridiculous."

Tog Lee Chang Chu looked at Pedro Nazaré and he turned and started for the door followed by Fredric Lippman who was still scowling his puzzlement.

"Wait a minute!" Ronny snapped. "I tell you it's ridiculous. And why follow her suggestions? She's just my assistant."

Pedro Nazaré said, "Come on, Fred, let's get going, we'll have to pack." But Lippman wasn't having any.

"His assistant?" he said to Tog Lee Chang Chu.

Tog Lee Chang Chu's face changed expression in sudden decision. She opened her bag and brought forth a Section G

identification wallet and flicked it open. The badge was gold. "I suggest you hurry," she said to the two agents.

They left, and Tog turned back to Ronny, her eyebrows raised questioningly.

Ronny sank down into one of the chairs recently occupied by the other two agents and tried to unravel thoughts. He said finally, "I suppose my question should be, why do Ross Metaxa and Sid Jakes send an agent of supervisor rank to act as assistant to a probationary agent? But that's not what I'm asking yet. First, Lippman just called his buddy Tog. How come?"

Tog took her seat again, rueful resignation on her face. "You should be figuring it out on your own by this time, Ronny."

He looked at her belligerently. "I'm too stupid, eh?" The anger was growing within him.

"Tog," she said. "It's a nickname, or possibly you might call it a title. Tog. T-O-G. The Other Guy. My name is Lee Chang Chu, and I'm of supervisor grade presently working at developing new Section G operatives. Considering the continuing rapid growth of UP, and the continuing crises that come up in UP activities, developing new operatives is one of the department's most pressing jobs. Each new agent, on his first assignment, is always paired with an experienced old-timer."

"I see," he said flatly. "Your principal job being to needle the fledging, eh?"

She lowered her eyes. "I wouldn't exactly word it that way," she said. She was obviously unrepentant.

He said, "You must get a lot of laughs out of it. If I say, it seems to me democracy is a good thing, you give me an argument about the superiority of rule by an elite. If I say anarchism is ridiculous, you dredge up an opinion that it's man's highest ethic. You must laugh yourself to sleep at nights. You

and Metaxa and Jakes and every other agent in Section G. Everybody is in on the Tog gag but the sucker.”

“Sometimes there are amusing elements to the work,” Lee Chang conceded, demurely.

“Just one more thing I’d like to ask,” Ronny rapped. “This first assignment, agents are given. Is it always to look for Tommy Paine?”

She looked up at him, said nothing, but her eyes were questioning.

“Don’t worry,” he snapped. “I’ve already found out who Paine is.”

“Ah?” She was suddenly interested. “Then I’m glad I ordered that other probationary agent to leave. Evidently, he hasn’t. Obviously, I didn’t want the two of you comparing notes.”

“No, that would never do,” he said bitterly. “Well, this is the end of the assignment so far as you and I are concerned. I’m heading back for Earth.”

“Of course,” she said.

* * * *

He had time on the way to think it all over, and over and over again, and a great deal of it simply didn’t make sense. He had enough information to be disillusioned, sick at heart. To have crumbled an idealistic edifice that had taken a lifetime to build. A lifetime? At least three. His father and his grandfather before him had had the dream. He’d been weaned on the idealistic purposes of the United Planets and man’s fated growth into the stars.

He was a third-generation dreamer of participating in the glory. His grandfather had been a citizen of Earth and gave up a commercial position to take a job that amounted to little

more than a janitor in an obscure department of Interplanetary Financial Clearing. He wanted to get into the big job, into space, but never made it. Ronny's father managed to work up to the point where he was a supervisor in Interplanetary Medical Exchange, in the tabulating department. He, too, had wanted into space, and never made it. Ronny had loved them both. In a way fulfilling his own dreams had been a debt he owed them, because at the same time he was fulfilling theirs.

And now this. All that had been gold, was suddenly gilt-ed lead. The dream had become contemptuous nightmare.

Finally back in Greater Washington, he went immediately from the shuttleport to the Octagon. His Bureau of Investigation badge was enough to see him through the guide-guards and all the way through to the office of Irene Kasansky.

She looked up at him quickly. "Hi," she said. "Ronny Bronston, isn't it?"

"That's right. I want to see Commissioner Metaxa."

She scowled. "I can't work you in now. How about Sid Jakes?"

He said, "Jakes is in charge of the Tommy Paine routine, isn't he?"

She shot a sharper look up at him. "That's right," she said warily.

"All right," Ronny said. "I'll see Jakes."

Her deft right hand slipped open a drawer in her desk. "You'd better leave your gun here," she said. "I've known probationary agents to get excited, in my time."

He looked at her.

And she looked back, her gaze level.

Ronny Bronston shrugged, slipped the Model H from under his armpit and tossed it into the drawer.

Irene Kasansky went back to her work. "You know the way," she said.

This time Ronny Bronston pushed open the door to Sid Jakes' office without knocking. The Section G supervisor was poring over reports on his desk. He looked up and grinned his Sid Jakes' grin.

"Ronny!" he said. "Welcome back. You know, you're one of the quickest men ever to return from a Tommy Paine assignment. I was talking to Lee Chang only a day or so ago. She said you were on your way."

Ronny grunted, his anger growing within him. He lowered himself into one of the room's heavy chairs, and glared at the other.

Sid Jakes chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "Before we go any further, just to check, who is Tommy Paine?"

Ronny snapped, "You are."

The supervisor's eyebrows went up.

Ronny said, "You and Ross Metaxa and Lee Chang Chu—and all the rest of Section G. Section G is Tommy Paine."

"Good man!" Sid Jakes chortled. He flicked a switch on his order box. "Irene," he said, "how about clearing me through to the commissioner? I want to take Ronny in for his finals."

Irene snapped back something and Sid Jakes switched off and turned to Ronny happily. "Let's go," he said. "Ross is free for a time."

Ronny Bronston said nothing. He followed the other. The rage within him was still mounting.

In the months that had elapsed since Ronny Bronston had seen Ross Metaxa the latter had changed not at all. His clothing was still sloppy, his eyes bleary with lack of sleep or abun-

dance of alcohol—or both. His expression was still sour and skeptical.

He looked up at their entry and scowled, and made no effort to rise and shake hands. He said to Ronny sourly, “Okay, sound off and get it over with. I haven’t too much time this afternoon.”

Ronny Bronston was just beginning to feel tentacles of cold doubt, but he suppressed them. The boiling anger was uppermost. He said flatly, “All my life I’ve been a dedicated United Planets man. All my life I’ve considered its efforts the most praiseworthy and greatest endeavor man has ever attempted.”

“Of course, old chap,” Jakes told him cheerfully. “We know all that, or you wouldn’t ever have been chosen as an agent for Section G.”

Ronny looked at him in disgust. “I’ve resigned that position, Jakes.”

Jakes grinned back at him. “To the contrary, you’re now in the process of receiving permanent appointment.”

Ronny snorted his disgust and turned back to Metaxa. “Section G is a secret department of the Bureau of Investigation devoted to subverting Article One of the United Planets Charter.”

Metaxa nodded.

“You don’t deny it?”

Metaxa shook his head.

“Article One,” Ronny snapped, “is the basic foundation of the Charter which every member of UP and particularly every citizen of United Planets, such as ourselves, has sworn to uphold. But the very reason for the existence of this Section G is to interfere with the internal affairs of member planets, to sub-

vert their governments, their economic systems, their religions, their ideals, their very way of life.”

Metaxa yawned and reached into a desk drawer for his bottle. “That’s right,” he said. “Anybody like a drink?”

Ronny ignored him. “I’m surprised I didn’t catch on even sooner,” he said. “On New Delos Mouley Hassan, the local agent, knew the God-King was going to be assassinated. He brought in extra agents and even a detail of Space Forces guards for the emergency. He probably engineered the assassination himself.”

“Nope,” Jakes said. “We seldom go *that* far. Local rebels did the actual work, but, admittedly, we knew what they were planning. In fact, I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that Mouley Hassan provided them with the bomb. That lad’s a bit too dedicated.”

“But *why*,” Ronny blurted. “That’s deliberately interfering with internal affairs. If the word got out, every planet in UP would resign.”

“Probably no planet in the system that needed a change so badly,” Metaxa growled. “If they were ever going to swing into real progress, that hierarchy of priests had to go.” He snorted. “An immortal God-King, yet.”

Ronny pressed on. “That was bad enough, but how about this planet Mother, where the colonists had attempted to return to nature and live in the manner man did in earliest times.”

“Most backward planet in the UP,” Metaxa said sourly. “They just had to be roused.”

“And Kropotkin!” Ronny blurted. “Don’t you understand, those people were *happy* there. Their lives were simple, uncomplicated, and they had achieved a happiness that—”

Metaxa came to his feet. He scowled at Ronny Bronston and growled, "Unfortunately, the human race can't take the time out for happiness. Come along, I want to show you something."

He swung around the corner of his desk and made his way toward a ceiling-high bookcase.

Ronny stared after him, taken off guard, but Sid Jakes was grinning his amusement.

Ross Metaxa pushed a concealed button and the bookcase slid away to one side to reveal an elevator beyond.

"Come along," Metaxa repeated over his shoulder. He entered the elevator, followed by Jakes.

There was nothing else to do. Ronny Bronston followed them, his face still flushed with the angered argument.

The elevator dropped, how far, Ronny had no idea. It stopped and they emerged into a plain, sparsely furnished vault. Against one wall was a boxlike affair that reminded Ronny of nothing so much as a deep-freeze.

For all practical purposes, that's what it was. Ross Metaxa led him over and they stared down into its glass-covered interior.

Ronny's eyes bugged. The box contained the partly charred body of an animal approximately the size of a rabbit. No, not an animal. It had obviously once been clothed, and its limbs were obviously those of a tool using life form.

Metaxa and Jakes were staring down at it solemnly, for once no inane grin on the supervisor's face. And that of Ross Metaxa was more weary than ever.

Ronny said finally, "What is it?" But he knew.

"You tell us," Metaxa growled sourly.

"It's an intelligent life form," Ronny blurted. "Why has it been kept secret?"

"Let's go on back upstairs," Metaxa sighed.

Back in his office he said, "Now I go into my speech. Shut up for a while." He poured himself a drink, not offering one to the other two. "Ronny," he said, "man isn't alone in the galaxy. There's other intelligent life. Dangerously intelligent."

In spite of himself Ronny reacted in amusement. "That little creature down there? The size of a small monkey?" As soon as he said it, he realized the ridiculousness of his statement.

Metaxa grunted. "Obviously, size means nothing. That little fellow down there was picked up by one of our Space Forces scouts over a century ago. How long he'd been drifting through space, we don't know. Possibly only months, but possibly hundreds of centuries. But however long he's proof that man is not alone in the galaxy. And we have no way of knowing when the expanding human race will come up against this other intelligence—and whoever it was fighting."

* * * *

"But," Ronny protested, "you're assuming they're aggressive. Perhaps coming in contact with these aliens will be the best thing that ever happened to man. Possibly that little fellow down there is the most benevolent creature ever evolved."

Metaxa looked at him strangely. "Let's hope so," he said. "However, when found he was in what must have been a one-man scout. He was dead and his craft was blasted and torn—obviously from some sort of weapons' fire. His scout was obviously a military craft, highly equipped with what could only be weapons, most of them so damaged our engineers haven't been able to figure them out. To the extent they have been able to

reconstruct them, they're scared silly. No, there's no two ways about it, our little rabbit sized intelligence down in the vault was killed in an interplanetary conflict. And sooner or later, Ronny, man in his explosion into the stars is going to run into either or both of the opponents in that conflict."

Ronny Bronston slumped back into his chair, his brain running out a dozen leads at once.

Metaxa and Jakes remained quiet, looking at him speculatively.

Ronny said slowly, "Then the purpose of Section G is to push the member planets of UP along the fastest path of progress, to get them ready for the eventual, inevitable meeting."

"Not just Section G," Metaxa growled, "but all of the United Planets organization, although most of the rank and file don't even know our basic purpose. Section G? We do the dirty work, and are proud to do it, by every method we can devise."

Ronny leaned forward. "But look," he said. "Why not simply inform all member planets of this common danger? They'd all unite in the effort to meet the common potential foe. Anything standing in the way would be brushed aside."

Metaxa shook his head wearily. "Would they? Is a common danger enough for man to change his institutions, particularly those pertaining to property, power and religion? History doesn't show it. Delve back into early times and you'll recall, for an example, that in man's early discovery of nuclear weapons he almost destroyed himself. Three or four different socio-economic systems co-existed at that time and all would have preferred destruction rather than changes in their social forms."

Jakes said, in an unwonted quiet tone, "No, until someone comes up with a better answer it looks as though Section G is going to have to continue the job of advancing man's institutions, in spite of himself."

The commissioner made it clearer. "It's not as though we deal with all our member planets. It isn't necessary. But you see, Ronny, the best colonists are usually made up of the, well, crackpot element. Those who are satisfied, stay at home. America, for instance, was settled by the adventurers, the malcontents, the non-conformists, the religious cultists, and even fugitives and criminals of Europe. So it is in the stars. A group of colonists go out with their dreams, their schemes, their far-out ideas. In a few centuries they've populated their new planet, and often do very well indeed. But often not and a nudge, a push, from Section G can start them up another rung or so of the ladder of social evolution. Most of them don't want the push. Few cultures, if any, realize they are mortal; like Hitler's Reich, they expect to last at least a thousand years. They resist any change—even change for the better."

Ronny's defenses were crumbling, but he threw one last punch. "How do you know the changes you make are for the better?"

Metaxa shrugged heavy shoulders. "It's sometimes difficult to decide, but we aim for changes that will mean an increased scientific progress, a more advanced industrial technology, more and better education, the opening of opportunity for every member of the culture to exert himself to the full of his abilities. The last is particularly important. Too many cultures, even those that think of themselves as particularly advanced, suppress the individual by one means or another."

Ronny was still mentally reeling with the magnitude of it all. "But how can you account for the fact that these alien intelligences haven't already come in contact with us?"

Metaxa shrugged again. "The Solar System, our sun, is way out in a sparsely populated spiral arm of our galaxy. Undoubtedly, these others are further in toward the center. We have no way of knowing how far away they are, or how many sun systems they dominate, or even how many other empires of intelligent life forms there are. All we know is that there are other intelligences in the galaxy, that they are near enough like us to live on the same type planets. The more opportunity man has to develop before the initial contact takes place, the stronger bargaining position, or military position, as the case may be, he'll be in."

Sid Jakes summed up the Tommy Paine business for Ronny's sake. "We need capable agents badly, but we need dedicated and efficient ones. We can't afford anything less. So when we come upon potential Section G operatives we send them out with a trusted Tog to get a picture of these United Planets of ours. It's the quickest method of indoctrination we've hit upon; the agent literally teaches himself by observation and participation. Usually, it takes four or five stops, on this planet and that, before the probationary agent begins sympathizing with the efforts of this elusive Tommy Paine. Especially since every Section G agent he runs into, including the Tog, of course, fills him full of stories of Tommy Paine's activities.

"You were one of the quickest to stumble on the true nature of our Section G. After calling at only three planets you saw that we ourselves are Tommy Paine."

“But...but what’s the end?” Ronny said plaintively. “You say our job is advancing man, even in spite of himself when it comes to that. We start at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder in a condition of savagery, clan communism in government, simple animism in religion, and slowly we progress through barbarism to civilization, through paganism to the higher ethical codes, through chattel slavery and then feudalism and beyond. What is the final end, the Ultima Thule?”

Metaxa was shaking his head again. He poured himself another drink, offered the bottle this time to the others. “We don’t know,” he said wearily, “perhaps there is none. Perhaps there is always another rung on this evolutionary ladder.” He punched at his order box and said, “Irene, have them do up a silver badge for Ronny.”

Ronny Bronston took a deep breath and reached for the brown bottle. “Well,” he said. “I suppose I’m ready to ask for my first assignment.” He thought for a moment. “By the way, if there’s any way to swing it, I wouldn’t mind working with Supervisor Lee Chang Chu.”

GUN FOR HIRE

Joe Prantera called softly, "Al." The pleasurable, comfortable, warm feeling began spreading over him, the way it always did.

The older man stopped and squinted, but not suspiciously, even now.

The evening was dark, it was unlikely that the other even saw the circle of steel that was the mouth of the shotgun barrel, now resting on the car's window ledge.

"Who's it?" he growled.

Joe Prantera said softly, "Big Louis sent me, Al."

And he pressed the trigger.

And at that moment, the universe caved inward upon Joseph Marie Prantera.

There was nausea and nausea upon nausea.

There was a falling through all space and through all time. There was doubling and twisting and twitching of every muscle and nerve.

There was pain, horror and tumultuous fear.

And he came out of it as quickly and completely as he'd gone in.

He was in, he thought, a hospital and his first reaction was to think, *This here California. Everything different.* Then his second thought was *Something went wrong. Big Louis, he ain't going to like this.*