

THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT'S REVENGE

HARRY HARRISON



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1

I stood in line, as patient as the other taxpayers, my fingers filled out forms and my cash gripped hotly in my hand. Cash, money, the old-fashioned green folding stuff. A local custom that I intended to make expensive to the local customers. I was scratching under the artificial beard, which itched abominably when the man before me stepped out of the way and I was at the window. My finger stuck in the glue and I had a job freeing it without pulling the beard off as well.

“Come, come, pass it over,” the aging, hatchet-faced, bitter and shrewish female official said, hands extended impatiently.

“On the contrary,” I said, letting the papers and banknotes fall away to disclose the immense .50 recoilless pistol that I held. “*You* pass it over. All of that tax money you have extracted from the sheeplike suckers who populate this backward planet.”

I smiled to show that I meant it and she choked off a scream and began scrabbling in the cashier's drawer. It was a broad smile that showed all of my teeth, which I had stained bright red, which should have helped her decide on the proper course of action. As the money was pushed towards me I stuffed it into my long topcoat that was completely lined with deep pockets.

“What are you doing?” the man behind me gasped, eyes bulging like great white grapes.

“Taking money,” I said and flipped a bundle at him. “Why don't you have some yourself.” He caught it by reflex, goggled at it, and all the alarms went off at once and I heard the doors crashing shut. The cashier had managed to trigger an alarm.

“Good for you,” I said, “but don't let a minor thing like that prevent you from keeping the cash coming.”

She gasped and started to slip from sight, but a wave of the gun and another flash of my carmine dentures restored a semblance of life, and the flow of bills continued. People started to rush about and gun waving guards began to appear looking around enthusiastically for someone to shoot, so I triggered the radio relay in my pocket. There was a series of charming explosions all about the bank from every wastebasket where I had planted a gas bomb, followed by the even more charming screams of the customers. I stopped stowing money long enough to slip on the gas-tight goggles and settle them into place. And to clamp my mouth shut so I was forced to breathe through the filter plugs in my nostrils.

It was fascinating to watch. Blackout gas is invisible and has no odor but it does contain a chemical that acts almost instantly, bringing about a temporary but complete paralysis of the optic nerves. Within fifteen seconds everyone in the bank was blind.

With the exception of James Bolivar diGriz, myself, man of many talents. Humming a happy tune through closed lips I stowed away the remaining money. My benefactress had finally slid from sight and was screaming incontinently somewhere behind the counter. So were a lot of other people. There was plenty of groping about and falling over things as I made my way through this little blacked out corner of bedlam. An eerie sensation indeed, the one-eyed man in the country of the blind and all that. A crowd had already gathered outside pressing in fascinated awe against the windows and glass doors to watch the drama unfolding inside. I waved and smiled and a shudder passed through the nearest crowd as they pushed back in panic from the door. I shot the lock out, angling the gun so the bullets shrieked away, over their heads, and kicked the door open. Before exiting myself I threw a screamer out onto the sidewalk and quickly pushed the stopples into my ears.

The screamer sounded off and everyone began to leave quickly. You *have* to leave quickly when you hear one of these things. They send out a mixed brew of devilish sounds at the decibel level of a major earthquake. Some are audible, sounds like a magnified fingernail on a blackboard, while others are supersonic and produce sensations of panic and imminent death. Harmless and highly effective. The street was otherwise empty when I walked out to the car that was just pulling up to the curb. My head was throbbing with the supersonics that got past the plugs and I was more than happy to slip through the open door and relax while Angelina gunned the machine down the street.

“Everything go all right?” she asked, keeping her eyes on the road as she whipped around a corner on the outside wheels. Sirens began to sound in the distance.

“A piece of cake. Smooth as castor oil ...”

“Your similes leave a lot to be desired.”

“Sorry. Touch of indigestion this morning. But my coat is lined with more money than we could possibly need.”

“How nice!” she laughed, and she meant it. That irresistible grin, the crinkled nose. I longed to nibble it, or at least kiss her, but settled for a comradely pat on the shoulder since she needed all her concentration for driving. I popped a stick of gum in my mouth that would remove the red tooth dye and began to peel off my disguise.

As I changed so did the car. Angelina turned into a side street, slowed and then found an even quieter street to drive along. There was no one in sight. She pressed the button.

My, but technology can do some interesting things. The license plate flipped over to reveal a different number, but that was too simple a trick even to discuss. Angelina flicked on the windshield wipers as a fine spray of catalytic fluid sprang out of jets on the front of the car. Wherever it touched the blue paint turned a bright red. Except for the top of the car which became transparent so that in a few moments we were sitting in a bubble-top surveying the world around. A good deal of what appeared to be chrome-plated metal dissolved and washed away altering the appearance and even the make of the car. As soon as this process was complete Angelina sedately turned a corner and started back in the direction from whence we had come. Her orange wig was locked away with my disguise and I held the wheel while she put on an immense pair of goggly sunglasses.

“Where to next?” she asked as a huddle of shrieking police cars tore by in the opposite direction.

“I was thinking of the shore. Wind, sun, sand, that sort of thing. Healthy and bracing.”

“A little too bracing if you don’t mind my saying so.” She patted the rounded bulge of her midriff with a more than satisfied smile. “It’s six months now, going on seven, so I’m not feeling that athletic. Which reminds me ...” She flashed me a quick scowl, then turned her attention back to the road. “You promised to make an honest woman out of me so that we could call this a honeymoon.”

“My love,” I said, and clasped her hand in all sincerity. “At the first possible moment. I don’t want to make an honest woman out of you—that would be physically impossible since you are basically a larcenous minded as I am—but I will certainly marry you and slip an expensive—”

“Stolen!”

“—ring on this delicate little finger. I do promise. But the second we try to register a marriage we’ll be fed into the computer and the game will be up. Our little holiday at an end.”

“And you’ll be hooked for life. I think I better grab you now before I get too round to run and catch you. We’ll go to your beach resort and enjoy one last day of mad freedom. And tomorrow, right after breakfast, we are getting married. Do you promise?”

“There is just one question ...”

“Promise, Slippery Jim, I know you!”

“You have my word except ...”

She braked the car to a skidding stop and I found myself looking down the barrel of my own .5

recoilless. It looked very big. Her knuckle was white on the trigger.

~~“Promise you quick-witted slippery tricky crooked lying con man or I’ll blow your brains out.”~~

“My darling, you *do* love me!”

“Of course I do. But if I can’t have you all to myself I’ll have you dead. Speak!”

“We get married in the morning.”

“Some men are so hard to convince,” she whispered, slipping the gun into my pocket and herself into my arms. Then she kissed me with such delicious intensity that I almost looked forward to tomorrow.

2

“Where are you going, Slippery Jim?” Angelina asked, leaning out of the window of our room above stopped with my hand on the gate.

“Just down for a quick swim, my love,” I shouted back and swung the gate open. A .75 roared and the ruins of the gate were blown out of my hand.

“Open your robe,” she said, not unkindly, and blew the smoke from the gun barrel at the same time. I shrugged with resignation and opened the beach robe. My feet were bare. But of course I was fully dressed, with my pants legs rolled up and my shoes stuffed into my jacket pockets. She nodded understandably.

“You can come back upstairs. You’re going nowhere.”

“Of course I’m not.” Hot indignation. “I’m not that sort of chap. I was just afraid you might misunderstand. I just wanted to nip into the shops and ...”

“Upstairs.”

I went. Hell hath no fury etc. was invented to describe my Angelina. The Special Corps medics had stripped her of her homicidal tendencies, unknotted the tangled skeins of her subconscious and equipped her for a more happy existence than circumstance had previously provided. But when it came to the crunch she was still the old Angelina. I sighed and mounted the stairs with leaden feet.

And I felt even more of an unthinkiag fiend when I saw that she was crying. “Jim, you don’t love me!” A classic gambit since the first woman in the garden, but still unanswerable.

“I do,” I protested, and I meant it. “But, it’s just ... reflex. Or something like that. I love you, but marriage is, well, like going to prison. And in all my crooked years I have never been sent up.”

“It is liberation, not captivity,” she said and did things with her makeup that removed the ravages of the tears. I noticed for the first time that she had white lipstick on to match her white dress and a little white lacy kind of thing in her hair.

“This is just like going swimming in cold water,” she said, standing and patting my cheek. “Get over with quickly so you won’t feel it. Now roll down your pants and put those shoes on.”

I did, but when I straightened up to answer this last fatuous argument I saw that the door had opened and that a Marriage Master and his two witnesses were standing in the next room. She took my arm gently, I’ll say that for her, and at the same time the recorded strains of the mighty organ filled the air. She tugged at my elbow, I resisted for a moment, then lurched forward as a gray mist seemed to fall over my eyes.

When the darkness lifted, the organ was bleating its dying notes, the door was closing behind the departing backs and Angelina stopped admiring her ring-decorated finger long enough to raise her lip to mine. I had barely enough strength of will left to kiss her before I groaned.

There were a number of bottles on the sideboard and my twitching fingers stumbled through them to unerringly find a knobby flask of Syrian Panther Sweat, a potent beverage with such hideous aftereffects that its sale is forbidden on most civilized worlds. A large tumbler of this was more efficacious, I could feel it doing me harm, and I poured a second one. While I was doing this and immersed in my numbed thoughts a period of time must have passed because Angelina—*my* Angelina (suppressed groan)—now stood before me dressed in slacks and sweater with our bags packed and waiting at her side. The glass was plucked from my fingers.

“Enough private whoopee,” she said, not unkindly. “We’ll celebrate tonight but right now we have

to move. The marriage record will be filed at any moment and when our names hit the computer it's going to light up like a knocking shop on payday. By now the police will have tied us in to most of the crimes of the past two months and will come slaving and baying after us."

"Silence," I ordered, swaying to my feet. "The image is a familiar one. Get the car and we will leave."

I offered to help with the bags but by the time I communicated this information she was halfway down the stairs with them. With this encouragement I navigated the hazard and reached the door. The car was outside humming with unleashed power, the side door open and Angelina at the wheel tapping her foot with equally unleashed impatience. As I stumbled into it the first tentacles of reality penetrated my numbed cortex. This car, like all other ground cars on Kamata, was steam powered and the steam was generated by the combustion of a specie of peat bricks fed to the furnace by a ingenious and unnecessarily complicated device. It took at least a half an hour to raise steam to get moving. Angelina must have fired up before the wedding and planned every other step as well. My solitary contribution to all this was a private drunk which had been very little aid at all. I shuddered at what this meant, yet was still driven to the only possible conclusion.

"Do you have a drive-right pill?" I asked, hoarsely.

It was in the palm of her hand even as I spoke. Small, round, pink, with a black skull and crossbones on it. A sobering invention of some mad chemist that worked like a metabolic vacuum cleaner. Shortly after minutes after hitting the hydrochloric acid pool of my stomach the ingredients would be doing a blitzkrieg attack through my bloodstream. Not only does it remove all of the alcohol but strips away all of the side products associated with drinking as well, so that the pitiful subject is instantly sober and painfully aware of it.

"I can't take it without water," I mumbled, blinking at the plastic cup in her other hand. There was no turning back. With a last happy shudder I flipped the deadly thing into the back of my throat and drained the cup.

They say it doesn't take long, but that is an objective time. Subjective was hours. It is a most unusual experience and difficult to describe. Imagine if you will what it feels like to take the nozzle of a cold water hose in your mouth and then to have the water turned on. And then, an instant later, to have the water gushing in great streams from every orifice of your body, including the pores, until you are flushed completely clean.

"Wow," I said weakly, sitting up and dabbing at my forehead with my handkerchief. The houses of a small village rushed by and were replaced by farmlands. Angelina drove with calm efficiency and the boiler chunked merrily as it ate another brick of peat.

"Feeling better, I hope?" She dived into a traffic circle and left it by a different road with only a quick glimpse at the map. "The alarm is out for us, army, navy, everything. I've been listening to the command radio."

"Are we going to get away?"

"I doubt it—not unless you come up with some bright idea very quickly. They have a solid ring with an aerial cover around the area and are tightening it."

I was still recovering from the heroic treatment of the drive-right pill and had not collected all my wits. There was a direct connection from my muddled thoughts to my vocal cords that had no intervening censor of intelligence.

"A great start to marriage. If this is what it is like no wonder I have been avoiding it all these years."

The car swung off the road and shuddered to a stop in the deep grass under a row of blue-leaved trees. Angelina was out, had slammed the door and was reaching for her bag before I had time to react. I tried to tell her.

“I’m a fool ...”

“Then I’m a fool too for marrying you.” She was dry-eyed and cold of voice with all of her emotions strictly under control. “I tricked you and trapped you into marriage because it was what I thought you really wanted. I was wrong, so it is going to end right now before it really gets started. I’m sorry, Jim. You made an entirely new life for me and thought I could make one for you. It has been fun knowing you. Thank you and good-by.”

By the time she had finished, my thoughts had congealed into something roughly resembling their normal shape and I was weak but ready. I was out of the car before she had finished talking and was standing in front of her, blocking her way, holding her most gently by the arms.

“Angelina, I will tell you this but once and probably never again the rest of my life. So listen well and remember. At one time I was the best crook in the galaxy, before I was conned into the Special Forces Corps to help catch other crooks. And I caught you. Not only were you a crook but a mastermind, a criminal as well and a cheerfully sadistic murderess.” I felt her body shiver in my hands and held her tighter. “It has to be said, because that is what you were. You aren’t any more. You had reasons to be that way and the reasons have been removed and some unhappy quirks in your otherwise pristine cortex have been straightened out. And now I love you. But I want to remember that I loved you even during your unreconstructed days, which is saying a lot. So if I buck at the harness now, or am difficult to deal with in the mornings, just remember that and make allowances. Is it a deal?”

It apparently was. She dropped the bag—on my toe, but I dared not flinch—and wrapped her arms around me and was kissing me and knocked me over into the deep grass and I had a jolly time kissing her right back. The newlywed effect I suppose you would call it, great fun ...

We froze, rigid, as a pair of flywheel cycles moaned and skidded to a stop by our car. Only the police used these since they move a good deal faster than the peat-powered steamers. They are tricycles with a great heavy flywheel encased between the rear wheels. They plugged them in at night so their motor-generators could run the flywheel up to top speed. During the day the flywheel generated electricity to drive the motors in each wheel. Very efficient and smog-free. Very dangerous.

“This is the car, Podder!” one of the police shouted out over the constant moan of the flywheels.

“I’ll call it in. They can’t have gone far. We sure have them trapped now!”

Nothing infuriates me like the bland assurances of petty officials. Oh yes, really trapped now. I growled deep in my throat as the other uniformed incompetent poked his nose around the car and gaped at our cozy cuddle in the grass. He was still gaping when I lunged an arm up and around his neck with a tight squeeze on his throat and pulled him down to join us. It was fun to watch his tongue come out and his eyes pop and his head turn red but Angelina spoiled it. She whipped off his helmet and rapped him smartly—and accurately—on the temple with the heel of her shoe. He turned off and let him drop.

“And you talk about *me*,” my bride whispered. “You’ve got more than a touch of the old sadist in your own makeup.”

“I called it in. Everybody knows. We’ve sure got them now ...” the enthusiastic remaining official said, but his voice rattled to a stop when he looked down the muzzle of his associate’s riot gun. Angelina dug a sleep capsule out of her bag and snapped it under his nose.

“And now what, boss?” she asked, smiling happily at the two black-uniformed, brass-buttoned figures by the side of the road.

“I have been thinking,” I said, and rubbed my jaw and frowned with deep concentration to prove it. “We have had over four months of worryless holiday, but all good things must end. We could extend our leave. But it would be hectic to say the least and people would get hurt and you—while that is in fine shape—it is not quite the shape for flight and pursuit and general nastiness. Shall we return to the service from which we fled?”

“I was hoping you would say that. Morning sickness and bank robbery just don’t seem to mix. ~~will be fun to get back.~~”

“Particularly since they will be so glad to see us. Considering that they turned down our request for leave and we had to steal that mail ship.”

“Not to mention all the expense money we have stolen because we couldn’t touch our bank accounts.”

“Right. Follow me and we’ll do this with style.”

We stripped off their uniforms and gently laid the snoring peace officers in the rear of the car. One had pink polkadot underwear while the other’s was utilitarian black—but trimmed with lace. Which might have been local custom of dress but gave me second thoughts about the police on Kamata and I was glad we were leaving. Uniformed, helmeted, and goggled we hummed merrily down the road on our flywheel cycles waving to all the tanks and trucks that roared by the other way. Before there were too many screams and shouts of discovery I braked in the center of the road and signaled an armored car to stop. Angelina swung her cycle behind them so that they would not find the sight of a pregnant officer too distracting.

“Got them cornered!” I shouted. “But they have a radio so keep this off the net. Follow me.”

“Lead on!” the driver shouted, his mate nodding agreement while thoughts of rewards, fame, and medals danced dazzlingly before their eyes. I led them to a deserted track into the woods that ended at a small lake complete with ramshackle boathouse and dock.

I braked, waved them to a stop, touched my fingers to my lips and tiptoed back to their car. The driver lowered the side window and looked out expectantly.

“Breathe this,” I said and flipped a gas grenade through the opening.

There was a cloud of smoke followed by gasps followed by two more silent uniformed figures snoring in the grass.

“Going to take a quick peek at their underwear?” Angelina asked.

“No. I want to maintain some illusions, even if they are false.”

The cycles rolled merrily down the dock and off into the water where they steamed and shortcircuited and made a lot of bubbles. As soon as the armored car had aired out we boarded and drove away. Angelina found the driver’s untouched lunch and cheerfully consumed it. I avoided most of the main roads and beaded back to the city where the command post was located at the central police station. I wanted to go where the big action was.

We parked in the underground garage, deserted now, and took the elevator to the tower. The building was almost empty, except for the command center, and I found an unoccupied office nearby and left Angelina there. Innocently amusing herself with the sealed—but easily opened—confidential files. I lowered my goggles into place and staged a dusty, exhausted entrance to control. I was ignored. The man I wanted to see was pacing the floor sucking on a long dead pipe. I rushed up and saluted.

“Sir; are you Mr. Inskipp?”

“Yar,” he muttered, his attention still on the great wall chart that theoretically showed the conditions of the chase.

“Someone to see you, sir.”

“What? What?” he said, still distracted. Harold Peters Inskipp, director and mastermind of the Special Corps, not quite with it this day. He followed me out easily enough and I closed the door and slipped off the heavy goggles.

“We’re ready to come home now,” I told him. “If you can find a quiet way of getting us off the planet without the locals getting their greedy hands on us.”

His jaw clenched with anger and fractured the mouthpiece of the pipe into innumerable fragments that led him, spitting out pieces of plastic, to the room where Angelina was waiting.

3

“Arrgh!” Inskipp snarled, and shook the sheaf of papers in his hand so that they rattled like skeletal bones.

“Very expressive,” I said, slipping a cigar from my pocket humidor and holding it to my ear. “But with a very minimal content of information. Could you be more explicit?” I pinched the cigar’s small end and there was not the slightest crackle. Perfection.

“Do you know how many millions your crime wave has cost? The economy of Kamata ...”

“Will not suffer an iota. The government will reimburse the institutions that suffered the losses and will then in turn deduct the same amount from its annual payment to the Special Corps. Which has more money than it can possibly use in any case. And look at the benefits bestowed in return. Plenty of excitement for the populace, increased sales of newspapers, exercise for the sedentary law enforcement officers—and that is an interesting story in itself—as well as field maneuvers that were a pleasure for everyone involved. Far from being annoyed they should pay us a fee for making all these exciting things possible.” I lit the cigar and blew out a great cloud of fragrant smoke.

“Don’t play wise with me, you aging con man. If I turned you and your bride over to the Kamata authorities you would still be in jail 600 years from now.”

“Little chance of that, Inskipp, aging con man yourself. You are short of good field agents as it is. You need us more than we need you. So consider this chewing out at an end and get on with the business. I have been chastised.” I tore a button off the front of my jacket and threw it across the desk to him. “Here, rip off my medals and reduce me to the ranks. I am guilty. Next case.”

With a final simulated growl of anger he filed the papers in the wastebasket and took out a large red folder that buzzed threateningly when he touched it. His thumb print defused the security device and the folder dropped open.

“I have a top secret gravely important assignment here.”

“What other kind do I ever get?”

“It is hideously dangerous as well.”

“You are secretly envious of my good looks and have a death wish for me. Come on, Inskipp. Stop sparring and let me know what the deal is. Angelina and I can handle it better than the rest of your senile and feeble agents.”

“This job of work is for you alone. Angelina is, well ...” His face reddened and he examined the file closely.

“Whoopee!” I shouted. “Inskipp the killer, daredevil, master of men, secret power in the galaxy today. And he can’t say the word *pregnant*! How about *baby*! Wait, *sex*, that is a goodie. You blush to think about it. Go ahead, say *sex* three times fast, it will do you good—”

“Shut up, diGriz,” he growled. “At least you finally married her which shows you have a single drop of honesty in your otherwise rotten carcass. She stays behind. You go out on this one-man job. Probably leaving her a widow.”

“She looks awful in black so you can’t get rid of me that easily. Tell.”

“Look at this,” he said, taking a roll of film from the folder and slipping it into a slot in his desk. A screen dropped down from the ceiling and the room darkened. The film began.

The camera had been handheld, the color was off at times, and it was most unprofessional. But it was the best home movie I had ever seen because the material was so good. Authentic, no doubt about it.

it.

Someone was waging a war. It was a sunny day with white puffs of clouds against a blue sky. And black puffs of anti-aircraft fire in among them. But the fire was not heavy and there was not enough to stop the troop carriers that came in low and fast for landing. This was at an average-size spaceport, with the buildings in the far background and some cargo ships nearby. Other craft roared low and bomb explosions reached skyward from what must have been the defense positions. The impossibility of what was happening finally came home to me.

“Those are *spaceships!*” I gurgled. “And space *transports*. Is some numbskull so stupid to think that it can succeed in an interplanetary war? What happened after they lost—and how does it affect me?”

The film ended and the lights came up again. Inskipp steepled his fingers on the desk and leered over them.

“For your information, Mr. Know-it-all, this invasion succeeded—and so did the other ones before it. This film was taken by a smuggler, one of our regular informants, whose ship was just fast enough to get away during the battle.”

This was a stopper. I dragged deeply on the cigar and considered what little I knew about interplanetary warfare. There was little enough to know. Because it just doesn't work. Maybe a few times in the galaxy when local conditions are right, say a solar system with two inhabited planets. One planet is backward and the other advanced industrially the primitive one might be invaded successfully. But not if they put up any kind of a real defense. The distance-time relationships just don't make this kind of warfare practical. When every soldier and weapon and ration has to be lifted from the gravity well of a planet and carried across space the energy expenditure is considerable, the transport demands incredible and the cost unbelievable. If, in addition, the invader has to land in the face of determined opposition the invasion is impossible. And this is inside a solar system where the planets are practically touching on a galactic scale. The thought of warfare between planets in differing star systems is even more impossible.

But, once again, it has been proven that nothing is basically impossible if people want to tackle it hard enough. And things like violence, warfare and bloodshed are still hideously attractive to the lurking violence potential of mankind, despite the centuries of peace and stagnation. I had a sudden and depressing thought.

“Are you telling me that a successful interplanetary invasion has been accomplished?” I asked.

“More than one.” That evil smirk was decorating his face as he spoke.

“And you and the League would like to see this practice stopped?”

“Right on the head, Jim my boy.”

“And I am the sucker who has been picked for the assignment?”

He reached out, took my cigar from my numb fingers and dropped it into the ashtray—the solemnly shook my hand. “It's your job. Go out there and win.”

I slipped my hand from his treacherous embrace, wiped my fingers on my pantsleg and grabbed back my cigar.

“I'm sure that you will see that I have the best funeral the Corps can afford. Now, would you care to squeeze out a few details or would you prefer to blindfold me and shoot me out in a one-way cargo rocket?”

“Temper, my boy, temper. The situation seems to be quite clear. There has been little word about this in the news media because of certain political confusion surrounding the invasions, plus a rigid censorship by the planets under consideration. As we have reconstructed it—and good men have died getting this information—the responsible world is named Cliaand, the third planet in the Epsilon In system. There are two score planets orbiting this sun, but only three are inhabitable. And inhabitable Cliaand took over both the sister worlds some years ago, but we considered this no cause for alarm.

What is alarming is the fact that they have expanded their scope. *Interstellar* conquest, heretofore considered an impossibility. They have invaded and conquered *five* other planets in nearby systems and seem poised for bigger and better things. We don't know how they are doing it, but they must be doing something right. We have had agents on the conquered worlds but have learned little of value. The decision has been made, a high level one I assure you—you would stand and salute if you heard some of the names of the people involved—that we must get a man to Cliaand to root out the problem at the core of the woodpile and cut the Gordian knot.”

“Other than being contained in a mixed and disgusting metaphor I think the idea is a suicidal one. Instead of this we could ...”

“You are going. There is no possible way to wriggle out of this one, Slippery Jim.”

I tried. But nothing worked. I was given a copy of all the known details, a cortex-recording of the language and the masterkey to a fast pursuit ship to take me there. I returned gloomily to our quarters where Angelina, tired of doing her hair and her nails, was throwing a knife at a head-sized target on the far wall. She was very good. Even underhand, after a quick draw from her arm sheath, she could hit the black spot of either eye.

“Let me get a pic of Inskipp,” I said. “It will make a more interesting target and one that you can get a degree of pleasure out of.”

“Is that evil old man sending my darling out on a job?”

“That dirty old goat is trying to get me killed. The assignment is so top secret I can't tell a soul about it, particularly you, so here are all the papers, read them for yourself.”

While she did this I slipped the Cliaand language recording into the stamping machine. The machine recorded the material directly on my cortex without the boring and time-consuming intermediary of any learning process. The first session would take about a half an hour with a dozen or more short reinforcing sessions after that. I would end up speaking the language and having one hell of a headache from all the electronic fingering of my synapses. But there was a period of total unconsciousness while the machine operated and that was just what I felt like at the moment. I slipped the helmet down over my ears, settled on the couch and pressed the button.

There was a flicker of no-time and Angelina was carefully lifting off the helmet and handing me a pill at the same instant. I swallowed it and kept my eyes closed while the pain ebbed away. Soft lips kissed mine.

“They are trying to kill you, but you will not let them. You will laugh and win and someday you will have Inskipp's job,”

I opened one eye a crack and looked at her jubilant expression.

“Come home with my shield or on it? Go to glory or the grave? Are you worried about me?”

“All of the time. But that is a wife's job. I certainly cannot stand in the way of your career—”

“I didn't know I had one until you told me just now.”

“—and will do everything I can to help.”

“You can't come with me, for a very obvious and protruding reason.”

“I know that. But I will be with you in spirit all the time. How are you going to land on this world?”

“Board my nimble pursuit ship, come in straight and fast behind a radar screen, zing down into the atmosphere—”

“And get blasted into your component atoms. Here, read this report by the survivor of the last ship to try this approach.”

I read it. It was most depressing. I threw it back with the others.

“I heeded the warning. This planet appears to be militarized to the hilt. I'll bet even the house people wear uniforms. Bulling in like that is approaching these people on their own terms, competing in the area where they are best organized. What they are not organized against is a little bit of guile, some

larceny, a smooth approach covering a devious attack. Insinuate, penetrate, operate and extirpate.”

~~“All at once I am beginning not to like it,” my love said, frowning. “You will take care of yourself Jim? I don’t think worrying would be good for me right now.”~~

“If you wish to worry, worry about the fate of this poor planet with Slippery Jim unleashed against them. Their conquests are at an end, they are as good as finished.”

I kissed her resoundingly and walked out, head high and shoulders back.

Wishing that I was one tenth as sure of myself as I had acted. This was going to be a very rough one.

4

My planning had been detailed, the preparations complex, the operation gigantic. I had received more than one shrill cry of pain from Inskipp about the cost, all of which I dutifully ignored. It was my neck in the noose, not his, and I was hedging all the bets that I could to assure my corporeal survival. But even the most complicated plan is eventually completed, the last details sewed up, the final order issued. And the sheep led to the slaughter.

Baaa. Here I was, naked to the world, sitting in the bar of the intersystem spacer *Kannettava*, a glass of strong drink before me and a dead cigar clutched in my fingers. Listening to the announcement that we would be landing on Cliaand within the hour. I was naked, figuratively speaking of course. It had taken an effort of will and strong discipline to force myself to leave every article of an illegal nature behind. I had never done this in my entire life. No minibombs, gas capsules, gigli saws, fingertip drills, card holdouts, phone tappers. Nothing. Not even the lock pick that was always fixed to my toenail. Or ...

I grated my teeth at the thought and looked about me. The other revelers were knocking back the taxfree booze in a determined manner and none was looking at me. Slipping my wallet from my pocket I touched the seam at the top. And felt a certain stiffness. Memory, how it cuts both ways revealing and clouding. My own subconscious was fighting against me. Only my conscious mind was at all enthusiastic about landing on Cliaand without any illegal devices. I squeezed the wallet hard the right way and the tiny but incredibly strong lockpick dropped into my fingers. A work of art. I admired it when I raised my glass. And said good-bye. On the way back to my cabin I dropped it into waste disposal. It would go on with the ship while I landed on this singularly inhospitable world.

Every report and interview indicated that Cliaand had the most paranoid customs men in the known universe. Contraband simply could not be smuggled in. Therefore I was not trying. I was just what appeared to be: a salesman, representative of Fazzoletto-Mouchoir Ltd., dealers in deadly weapons. The firm existed and I was their salesman and no amount of investigation could prove otherwise. Let them try.

They did. Landing on Cliaand was not unlike going into prison. I, and the handful of other debarkees, trundled down the gangway and into a gray room of ominous aspect. We huddled together under the eyes of watchful and heavily armed guards, while our luggage was brought and dumped nearby. Nothing happened until the gangway had been withdrawn and the *Kannettava* had departed. Then, one by one, we were called out.

I was not first and I welcomed the opportunity to examine the local types. They were supreme indifferent to us, stamping about in knee-high boots, fingering their weapons and keeping their chin up high. Their uniforms were all the same color, a color which at first glance might be mistaken for a very unmilitary hue of carmine, a purplish red. Very quickly I realized that this was almost exactly the color of blood, half arterial blue, half venous pink. It was rather disgusting and hard to avoid looking at. And, in addition, gave no small hint about the nature of the wearer.

All of the guards were on the large side and ran to protruding jaws and little piggy eyes. Their helmets looked like fibersteel, with sinister black visors and transparent faceplates that could be dropped down. Each carried a gaussrifle, a multipurpose and particularly deadly weapon. High capacity batteries stored a really impressive electrical charge in the stock. When the trigger was depressed a strong magnetic field was generated in the barrel which accelerated the missile with

muzzle velocity that equaled any explosive cartridge weapon. And the gaussrifle was superior in that it had a more rapid rate of fire, made no sound, and shot out any one of an assortment of dead missiles, from poison needles to explosive charges. The Corps had reports about this weapon but I had never seen one. I made plans to rectify that situation as soon as possible.

“Pas Ratunkowy,” someone shouted and I stirred to life as I remembered this was my cover name. I waved hesitantly and one of the guards stomped and clacked over to me. I do believe that he had metal plates on his heels to increase the militaristic effect. I looked forward to getting a pair of these boots as well: I was beginning to like Cliaand.”

“You Pas Ratunkowy?”

“I am he, sir, at your service,” I answered in his native tongue, being careful to keep a foreign accent.

“Get your luggage. Come with me.”

He spun about and I had the temerity to call after him.

“But, sir, bags are too heavy to carry all at once.”

This time he impaled me with a cold, withering look and fingered his gaussrifle suggestively. “Cart,” he finally snarled and stabbed a finger at the far side of the prison yard. I humbly went after the cart. This was a drably efficient motorized platform that rolled along on small wheels. I quickly loaded my bags onto it and looked for my guide. He stood by a now open door with his finger even closer to the trigger than before. The electric motor whined at top speed and I galloped after the thing towards the door.

The inspection began.

How easy that is to say. But it is one of those simple statements like “I dropped the atom bomb and it went off.” This was the most detailed and thorough inspection I had ever experienced and I was exceedingly happy that I had found that lockpick first.

There were ten men waiting in the smooth-walled, antiseptically white room. Six took my baggage while the other four took me. The first thing they did was strip me mother naked and drop me into a fluoroscope. A magnifying one. Seconds later they were conferring over a blown-up print of the fillings in my teeth. There was a mutual decision that one of them was unduly large and had a rather unusual shape. A sinister looking array of dental gadgetry emerged and they had the filling out in a moment. While the tooth was being refilled with enamel—I’ll say that much for them—the original filling was being zapped by a spectroscope. They seemed neither depressed nor elated when the metallic content proved to be that of an accepted dental alloy. The search went on.

While my tender pink person was being probed one of the inquisitors produced a file of papers. Most of these were psigrams sent out after my landing application had been received. They had consulted Fazzoletto-Mouchoir Ltd., my employers, and had all the details of my job. It is a good thing that this was legitimate. I responded correctly to all the questions, inserting random sounds once or twice when the physical examination probed a tender spot. This appeared to go well; at least the file was closed and put aside.

While this was going on I had been catching glimpses of the fate of my bags. They suffered more than I did. Each of them had been opened and emptied, the contents spread out on the white tables, and the bag was then methodically taken to pieces. To little pieces. The seams were cut open, the fastenings removed, the handles dissected. And the resulting rubbish put in plastic bags, labeled and saved. No doubt for a later and most detailed inspection. My clothing was given only a perfunctory examination then pushed aside. I soon found out why. I would not be seeing it again until I left the planet.

“You will be issued with good Cliaand clothing,” one of my inquisitors announced. “It is pleasure to wear.” I doubted that very much but kept my silence.

“Is this religious symbol,” another asked, holding the photograph in his fingertips at arm’s length.

“It is a picture of my wife.”

“Only religious symbols permitted.”

“She is like an angel to me.”

They puzzled over this one for awhile, then reluctantly admitted the picture. Not that I would be able to have anything as deadly as the original. It was whisked away and a photographic copy returned. Angelina seemed to be scowling in this print or perhaps that was only my imagination.

“All of your personal items, identification and so on will be returned to you when you leave,” I was coldly informed.

“While on Cliaand you will wear local dress and observe local customs. Your personal items are not to be taken there.” Three very utilitarian and ugly pieces of luggage were indicated. “Here is your identification card.” I grabbed at it, happy to be assured of my existence, still naked and beginning to get a chill.

“What is in this locked case?” an inspector called out, a ring of expectancy in his voice like that of a hound catching the scent. They all stopped work and came over as the incriminating case was held out for my inspection. Their expressions indicated that whatever answer I gave would be admission of a crime to be followed by the death penalty. I permitted myself to cringe back and roll my eyes.

“Sirs, I have done nothing wrong ...” I cried.

“What is it?”

“Military weapons—”

There were stifled cries and one of them looked around as though for a gun to execute me on the spot. I stammered on.

“But, sirs, you must understand. These are the reason I came to your hospitable planet. My firm, Fazzoletto-Mouchoir Ltd., is an old and much respected manufacturer in the field of military electronics. These are samples. Some most delicate. Only to be opened in the presence of an armament specialist.”

“I am armament specialist,” one of them said, stepping forward. I had noted him earlier because of his bald head and a sinister scar that drew up one eye in a perpetual wink.

“Pleased to meet you, sir. I am Pas Ratunkowy.” He was unimpressed by my name and did not offer me his. “If I can have my key ring I will open said case and display to you its contents.”

A camera was swung into place to record the entire operation, before I was permitted to proceed. The armament specialist unlocked the case and flipped back the lid. The armament specialist glared down at the various components in their padded niches. I explained.

“My firm is the originator and sole manufacturer of the memory line of proximity fuses. No other line is as compact as ours, none as versatile.” I used tweezers to take a fuse from a holder. It was no larger than a pinhead. “This is the most miniscule, designed to be used in a weapon as small as a handgun. Firing activates the fuse which will then detonate the charge in the slug when it comes near a target of predetermined size. This other fuse is the most intelligent, designed for use in heavy weapons or missiles.” They all leaned forward eagerly when I held up the wafer of the Mem-IV and pointed out its singular merits.

“All solid state construction, capable of resisting incredible pressures, thousands of G’s, massive shocks. It can be preset to detonate only when approaching a specific target, or can be programmed to detonate externally and electronically at any time up to the moment of firing. It contains discrimination circuitry that will prevent explosion in the vicinity of friendly equipment. It is indeed unique.”

“I replaced it carefully and closed the lid on the case. A happy sigh swept through the spectators. This was the kind of thing they really *liked*. The armament specialist took up the case.

“This will be returned to you when it is needed to demonstrate.”

Reluctantly, the examination drew to a close. The fuses had been the highpoint of the search and nothing else could quite equal this. They had some fun squeezing the tubes and emptying the jars

my toilet kit but their hearts were not really in it. Finally tiring of this they bundled away all my goods and tossed me my new clothing.

“Four and half minutes to dress,” an exiting inspector said. “Bring bags.”

My garments were not what might be considered high fashion under any conditions. Underwear and such were a drab utilitarian gray and manufactured from some substance that felt like a mixture of shredded machine shop waste and sandpaper. I sighed and dressed. The outer garment was a one piece jumpsuit sort of thing that made me look like some giant form of wasp with its wide black and yellow bands. Well, if that is what the well dressed Cliaandian wore, that is what I would wear. Not that I had much choice. I picked up the two bags, their sharp handles instantly cutting into my palms, and leapt through the single open door.

“Car,” a guard said outside, pointing to a driverless bub-bletopped vehicle that stood nearby. We were now in a large room, still decorated in the same prison gray. The side door of the vehicle opened at my approach.

“I will be pleased to take car,” I nodded and smiled. “But where shall I go—”

“Car knows. In.”

Not the galaxy’s most witty conversationalists. I threw in my bags and sat down. The door wheezed shut and the bank of lights on the robodriver lit up. We started forward and a heavy portal swung open before us. And another and another, each one thick enough to seal a bank vault. After the last one was shot up into the open air and I winced at the impact of sunlight. And looked on with great interest at the passing scene.

Cliaand, if this nameless city was any example, was a modernized, mechanized, and busy world. Cars and heavy lorries filled the motorways, all apparently under robot control since they were even spaced and moved at impressive speeds. Pedways were on both sides and crossed overhead. There were stores, signs, crowds, uniforms. Uniforms! That single word does not convey the bemedaled and multicolored glories that surrounded me. *Everyone* wore a uniform of some sort with the different colors, I am sure, denoting the different branches and services. None of them were striped yellow and black. One more handicap placed in my way, but I shrugged it off. When you are drowning who cares if a teacup of water is poured over your head. Nothing about this piece of work was going to be easy.

My car darted out of the rushing traffic, dived down into another tunnel entrance and drew to a stop before an ornately decorated doorway. The great golden letters *Zlato-Zlato* were inscribed over the entrance which, in Cliaandian, might be translated as *luxury*. This was a pleasant change. A beribboned, jeweled and elegant doorman rushed forward to open the door, then stopped and curled his lip when he saw my clothes. He let go of the door and stamped away and his place was taken by a bullet-necked individual in a dark gray uniform. Little silver crossed knife-and-battle-ax insignia were on both shoulders and his buttons were silver skulls. Somehow, not very encouraging.

“I am Pacov,” this depressing figure mumbled. “Your bodyguard.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir, a real pleasure.”

I climbed out, carrying my own bags it will be noted, and followed the grim back of my watchdog into the lobby of the hotel, which is what it proved to be. My identification was accepted with a maximum of discourtesy, a room assigned, a bellboy reluctantly prodded into showing me the way and off we went. My status as a theoretically respected offworld sales representative got me into the establishment, but that did not mean that I had to like it. My wasp colors branded me an alien, and an alien they were going to keep me.

The quarters were luxurious, the bed soft, the bugs enthusiastically present. Sound and optic, they seemed to be built into every fitting and fixture. Every other knob on the knobbed furniture was a microphone and the light bulbs turned to follow me with their beady little eyes when I moved. When I went into the bath to shave, an optical eye looked back at me through the lightly silvered mirror and

there was another optical pickup in the end of my toothbrush—no doubt to spy out any secrets lurking in my molars. All very efficient.

They thought. It made me laugh, and I did, turning it into a snort when it emerged so my patie bodyguard would not be suspicious. He pad-padded after me wherever I went in the spacious apartment. No doubt he would sleep at the foot of my bed when I retired.

And all of this was of no avail. Love laughs at locksmiths—and so does Jim diGriz, who knows an incredible amount, if you will excuse my seeming immodesty, about bugging. This was a case of massive overkill. So there were a lot of bugs. So what do you do with all that information? Computer circuitry would be completely useless in an observational situation like this one, which meant that a large staff of human beings would be watching, recording and analyzing. There is a limit to the number of people who can be assigned to this kind of work because a geometric progression soon takes place with watchers watching watchers until no one is doing anything else. I am sure there was a large staff keeping a keen eye on me, foreigners were rare enough to enjoy this luxury. Not only would my quarters be bugged but the areas I normally passed through, ground cars and such.

The entire city could not be bugged, nor was there reason to do so. All I had to do was act my normal humble cover-role self for awhile until I found the opportunity to leave the bugged areas. And I cook up a plan that would permit my complete disappearance once I was out of sight. I would have only one chance at this; whatever plan I produced would have to work the first time out or I would be a very dead rat.

Pacov was always there, watching my every motion. He was looking when I went to sleep at night and the suspicious look in those hard little eyes was the first thing I saw in the morning. Which was just the way I wanted it. Pacov would be the first to go, but until then his mere presence with me meant that my watchers were relaxed. Let them relax. I looked relaxed, too—but I wasn't. I was examining every aspect of the city that I could see, looking for that rathole.

On the third day I found it. It was one of the many possibilities I had under consideration and it quickly proved to be the best. I made plans accordingly and that night smiled into the darkness as I went to sleep. I'm sure the smile was observed with infrared cameras—but what can be read from a smile?

The fourth day opened as did all the others with breakfast served in the room.

“My, my, but I am hungry today,” I told the glowering Pacov. “It must be the exhilarating atmosphere and aura of good cheer on your fine planet. I believe I will have a little more to eat.”

I did. A second breakfast. Since I had no idea when my next meal might be I decided to stoke up as best I could.

Standard routine followed. We emerged from the hotel at the appointed hour and the robocar was waiting. It started at once towards its programmed destination, the war office where I had been demonstrating the effectiveness of the Fazzoletto-Mouchoir fuses. A number of targets had been destroyed, and today others would be blasted under even more exacting circumstances. It was all good fun.

We surfaced on the main road, spun down it and turned off into the side road that led to our destination. Traffic was light here—as always—and no pedestrians were in sight. Perfect. Street after street zipped by and I felt a familiar knot of tension developing. All or nothing, Slippery Jim, here we go ...

“Ah-choo,” I said, with what I hoped was appropriate realism, and reached for my handkerchief. Pacov was suspicious. Pacov was always suspicious.

“Bit of dust in nose, you know how it is,” I said. “Say, look, is that not the good General Trogborn over there?” I pointed with my free hand.

Pacov was well-trained. His eyes only flickered aside for an instant before they returned to me. The

instant was all I needed. Knotted into the handkerchief was a roll of small coins, the only weapon I could obtain under the authority's watchful gaze. I had assembled it, coin by coin, under the bedcover at night. As the eyes flickered my hand struck, swinging the hard roll in a short arc that ended on the side of Pacov's head. He slumped with a muffled groan.

And even as he slumped down I was leaning over into the front of the car and banging down on the emergency stop button. The motor died, the brakes locked, we squealed to a stop and the doors popped open. Not more than a dozen paces from the selected spot. A bullseye. I was out and running at the same moment.

Because when I hit my bodyguard and the stop button every alarm must have lit up on the bugging board—there were plenty of little seeing eyes in the car. The forces of the enemy were launched at the same instant I was. All I had were seconds—a minute perhaps—of freedom before the troops closed in and grabbed me.

Would it be enough time?

Running, head down as fast as I could, I turned and skidded into the narrow opening of the service street. This cut through behind a row of buildings and emerged on a different street. There were robots here loading rubbish into bins, but they ignored me as I ran by since they were simple M type programmed for nothing but this kind of work.

The robot pusher was another matter. He was human and had an electronic lash that he used to stretch the robots along. It cracked out and snapped around me and the electric current crackled into my side.

5

It was shocking, to say the least, but I barely felt it. The voltage is kept low since it is meant to stir the robots, not to cook out their brain circuits. I grabbed the whip as soon as it hit and pulled hard.

All of this was of course according to plan. I had seen this robot pusher and his workgang in the same place every day when we passed; Cliaand does love its routine. The robot pusher, a thick-necked and thuggy looking individual, could be counted on to interfere with a running alien—and had done just as I had hoped. When I pulled on the whip I had him off balance and he staggered towards me, jaw agape, and I let him have a roundhouse right on the point of that agaping jaw. It connected.

He shook his head, growled something, and came at me with his hands ready to crunch and rend.

This was *not* according to plan. He was supposed to drop instantly so I could rush through the rest of the routine before the cavalry arrived. How could I have known that not only did he have the IQ of a block of stone but the constitution of one as well? I stepped aside, his fingers grabbed empty air, and he began to sweat. Time was passing and I had no time. I had to render this hulk unconscious in the quickest way possible. I did. It wasn't graceful but it worked. I tripped him as he went by, then jumped on his back and rode him to the ground accelerating his fall. And held him by the head and pounded against the pavement. It took three good knocks—I was afraid the pavement would give way before he did—before he grunted and relaxed.

In the distance the first siren sounded. I sweated harder. Indifferent to the ways of man the robots dumped their dustbins.

The robot pusher was dressed in a uniform of a decomposed green in color, no doubt symbolic of his trade. It was closed with a single zipper which I unzipped, then began to work the clothing off his bulky and unyielding form. While the sirens grew closer. At the last moment I had to stop and tear his boots off in order to remove the trousers, a noisome operation that added nothing good to the entire affair.

The siren echoed loudly from the walls of the service street and brakes squealed nastily close by.

With what very well might be called frantic haste I pulled the uniform on over my own wasp-like garb and zipped it shut. Running feet pounded loudly towards me. I grabbed up the whip and let the nearest robot have a crack right across his ball bearings.

“Stuff this man into a bin!” I ordered and stood back as it grabbed up its former master.

The feet had just vanished from view when the first of the red uniformed soldiers burst into sight.

“An alien!” I shouted, and shook my whip towards the other end of the narrow street. “He went thataway. Fast. Before I could stop him.”

The soldiers kept going fast as well. Which was a good thing since the pair of recently removed boots were lying there right in plain sight. I threw them in the bin after their owner and cracked the whip on my half dozen robots.

“We march,” I ordered. “To the next location.” I hoped they were programmed for a regular route—and they were. The truck-robot led the way and the others fell in behind them. I went behind, whip ready. My little procession emerged into the police gorged, soldier full street. Armored vehicles twisted around us and drivers cursed. My faithful band of robots struck straight across the street through this mess while I, with a paralyzed smile on my lips, trotted along after them. I was afraid that if I made any attempt to change the orders my mechanical team would stage a sit-down right there in the street. We passed behind the abandoned groundcar just as my old bodyguard, Pacov, was being

helped from it. I turned my back on him and tried to ignore the chill prickling up and down the nape of my neck. If he recognized me ...

The first robot entered another service way and I staggered after them until, after what felt like two day walk, I entered this haven of relative safety. It was a coolish day but I was sweating heavily. I leaned against the wall to recover while my robots emptied the bins. More cars were still appearing on the street I had so recently left and a flight of jets thundered by overhead. My, but they certainly were missing me.

What next? A good question. Very soon now when no trace of the fugitive alien could be found someone would remember the one witness to his escape. And they would want to talk to the robot pusher again. Before that moment came I would have to be elsewhere—but where? My assets were very limited; a collection of garbage collecting robots, now industriously clanking away at their trade in two uniforms—one worn over the other—either of which made me a marked man, and an electronic whip. Good only for whipping robots; the feeble current it generated was just enough to close a relay to cancel a previous order or action. What to do?

There was a grating noise close behind me and I jumped aside as a rusty iron door slid upwards. A fat man in a white hat poked his head out.

“I got another barrel in here for you, Slobodan,” he said, then looked suspiciously at me. “You ain’t Slobodan.”

“You’re right. Slobodan is someone else. And he is somewhere else. In the hospital. Having a hernia removed. They’re putting in a new one.”

Was opportunity tapping? I talked fast and thought even faster. There was still plenty of rushing about in the street I had so recently crossed but no one was looking into the serviceway. I cracked my whip across the gearbox of the nearest robot and ordered him to me.

“Follow that man,” I said, snapping my whip in the right direction. White hat popped back inside the robot followed him and I followed the robot.

Into a kitchen. A big one, a restaurant kitchen obviously. And there was no one else in sight.

“What time do you open?” I asked. “I’m getting quite an appetite on this job.”

“Not until tonight—hey! Tell this robot to stop following me and get that garbage out of here.”

The cook was backing around the room with the robot trundling faithfully after him. They made a fine pair.

“Robot,” I said, and cracked the whip. “Do not follow that man any more. Just reach out your implacable little robot hands and grab him by the arms so he cannot get away.”

The robot’s reflexes, being electronic, were faster than the cook’s. The steel hands closed, the cook opened his mouth to complain—and I stuffed his hat into it. He chewed it angrily and made muffled noises deep in his throat. He kept this up all the time I was tying him into the chair with a fine assortment of towels, securing the gag in place as well. No one else had appeared and my luck was still running strong.

“Out,” I ordered the robot, cracking it across the patient metal back. The others were still working away and I laid about like a happy flagellant until they were all quivering for orders.

“Return. To the place from whence you came this morning. Go now.”

Like well-trained troops they turned and started away. Thankfully, in the direction away from the street we had just crossed. I popped back into the kitchen and locked the door. Safe for the moment. They would trace me to the robot rubbishmen sooner or later, but would have no idea where or when I had left the convoy. Things were working out just fine.

The captive cook had managed to knock the chair over and was wriggling, chair and all, towards the exit.

“Naughty,” I said, and took the largest cleaver from the rack. He stopped at once and rolled his eyes.

at me. I put the cleaver and the whip where they could be reached quickly and looked about. For a little while at least I could breathe easy and make some more definite plans. It has all been rush and improvise so far. There was a sudden knocking in the distance and the sharp ringing of a bell. I sighed and picked up the cleaver again. Rush and improvise was the motto of this operation.

“What is that?” I asked the cook, slipping the hat from his mouth for the moment.

“The front door. Someone there,” he said hoarsely, his eyes on the cleaver I held ready over his head. I restored the gag and sidled to the swinging door on the far wall and opened it enough to peer through.

The dining room beyond was dark and empty. The banging and ringing came from the entrance on the far side. No one else had appeared to answer this noisy summons so I felt safe in assuming that the cook and I were alone for the moment. Now to see what it was all about. With the cleaver at the ready I went to the front entrance, slid back the bolt and opened the door a crack.

“Whaddayawant?” I asked, aiming for the same rudimentary grammar and low accent voiced by the cook.

“Refrigerator service. You called you got trouble. What kind of trouble?”

“Big trouble!” My heart bounded with unexpected joy. “Come in and bring biggest toolbox you got.”

It was a fair-sized toolbox and I let him in, closed the door behind, and tapped him smartly on the back of the head with the flat of the cleaver blade. He folded nicely. His uniform was a utilitarian dark green, a great improvement on wasp, white or garbage, my only choice up to this moment. I stripped him quickly and tied him to a chair next to the cook where they commiserated in silence with each other. For the first time I was ahead of my pursuers. With luck it would be some hours before my captives were discovered and connected with my flight. I put the green uniform on, prepared a large number of sandwiches, picked up the toolbox, tipped my uniform cap to the captives in the kitchen and slipped out the front door.

A large riding robot was standing there, another toolbox hanging from one hand, humming quietly to itself. Painted on its metallic chest was the same crest of the service company that now adorned my own chest.

“We travel in comfort,” I said. “Take this.” I got my fingers out of the way just in time as it reached for the toolbox.

During my rapid trips through the city I had seen a number of these riding robots from a distance but had never been close to one before. There was a sort of saddle arrangement on their backs where the operator rode, but I hadn't the slightest idea of how to get into the seat. Did the thing kneel to be mounted or drop down a ladder or what? Cars and other robots were going by in this street and a squad of soldiers was approaching at a good clip. I found myself sweating again.

“I wish to leave. Now.”

Nothing happened. Except that the soldiers were that much closer. The robot stood as stolid as a statue. There was no help here. I didn't know if it was the orthodox manner or not, I had to do something, so I put one foot on the thing's hip socket, grabbed a riding light up near its shoulder blade and swarmed up its side. Hidden motors hummed louder as it shifted balance to accommodate my added weight. I slipped into the saddle just as the squad of soldiers trotted by. They ignored me completely.

The seat was comfortable. I had a good view, with my head at least three meters above the ground and I hadn't the slightest idea what to do next. Though leaving this vicinity would make fine opening. A compact control panel was set into the top of the robot's head and I pressed the button labeled WALK. I felt the grinding vibration of internal gears being engaged and it began to mark time in place. A good beginning. A rapid search found the button marked FORWARD. It lurched ahead and

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