

Night Flowers



Philip H. Turner

Part 1

J&J
BOOKS

By The Same Author

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The author asserts his moral right of identification.

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About this book . . .

Started in 1975 and heavily revised over the next five or six years, *Night Flowers* has always been considered way ahead of its time – or so the publishers which rejected it suggested in their comments about it.

The first book-format edition more than marked the novel's age of majority. In fact, it had just about reached its twenty-third birthday, and the outside world on the eve of the third millennium had still to catch up with the author's ideas for concentrated refuse recycling on a grand and extremely profitable scale.

And highly profitable that business will be some day. The author's thoughts on the matter indicate that he believes that the opportunity to turn other people's discards into power and renewed raw materials will be worth a vicious commercial war in a society which has already taken a plunge into lawlessness on a grand scale.

He also was advocating extensive cultivation of renewable 'biofuels' back in the 1970s – a concept which governments around the world have discussed sporadically but failed to take too seriously.

In the world within these pages, all sorts of people carry arms quite legitimately because there are plenty of others ready to take advantage of them if they are unready, or unwilling, to defend themselves.

Looking forward from 1975, the author has anticipated the next step beyond so-called 'booze cruises'. In the author's alternative world, citizens at every level of society are prepared to circumvent taxes which they believe to be unjust and those charged with dispensing justice have adopted a very pragmatic attitude of mind in response.

As ever, the many are going about their lives and creating a framework of normality, in and out of which the extraordinary duck and dive as they do their particular thing.

I / PROGRESSION

' . . . black suns blazed their hellish light
To mask the dawn in afternoon.
Through blinded eyes, I watched it shine.
Trapped by thought,
the night flower strained
but fell short of the sun . . . '

From 'An Epitaph'

Monday, Halgary 15th

01. An Expressway In Flames

A WATERFALL OF RAIN filled the second hour of a black night. The summer storm on Mid-Year Day was both unseasonable and unwelcome. Charging at streaks of light created by its own double headlights, the thirty-ton transiter was the only vehicle on the inward curve of the expressway.

Spray from the eight wheels of the streamlined tractor unit and its single trailer lofted across the hard shoulder in the grip of a westerly wind. It speckled the white rail-fence with oily, iridescent drops. The first prolonged fall of rain for over a month had blended with oil and rubber dust to render the road surface treacherous in places.

The transiter driver maintained with confidence his steady sixty-five miles per hour. Corin Tait had been driving heavy goods vehicles between the western lowlands of Norland and southern Camerland for over twenty years. The home stretch of a journey of over three hundred miles was as familiar as the interior of his cab.

The load in his trailer did not bear close inspection. An unholy combination of Camerlish excise duty, a vastly unpopular counter-alcoholism tax and sales tax had added over 1,000% to the basic manufacturing and marketing costs of spirits, turning Revenue evasion into a growth industry of the day. Even those charged with collecting the King's bounty were involved. Several cases of a cargo of uisge imported by stealth from more liberal Norland were destined for the private homes of public servants.

The door of the sleeping pod behind the transiter's cab, above the engine compartment, slid open with a liquid hiss. Lesley Talbot, leader of the uisge-importing band, yawned mightily, then swung athletically down the short ladder to the passenger chair.

"About half an hour to Briford," remarked the driver, taking his eyes from the turbulent swirl in his headlights for a moment. Red and green glows from the instrument panel gave his lined, middle-aged face a Satanic cast. "Just coming up on the county boundary now."

Talbot yawned again as the vehicle sprayed past the lights of a sign reading *Welcome To Stanton*. She took a uisge-flavoured cigarette from

the dispenser on the dashboard. Her eyes fell on the proximity scope. "What's that?" She tapped a yellow dot on the angled screen with a long, slender finger.

Tait dropped his eyes to the projection from the repeater in the lower-right corner of the panoramic windscreen. A solid, yellow blob in the delicate, green, rain-mush confirmed that the transiter was not quite alone on the expressway as it approached a cutting.

"Fervoek!" muttered Tait in disgust. "Right, I'll pay you when we get there. Never expected nothing but Prot patrols out in this lot. Not with today being a holiday." His accent was an irregular mixture of north and south.

"Never bet on certainties," laughed Talbot. Pencil lines of shadow chased around her face, showing that her age was nearer thirty than twenty.

Headlight beams sliced past the transiter as the dual-lane expressway began a long, descending turn on the approach to the lights of a minor interchange complex. The figure 93 in yellow appeared beside the dot on the proximity scope as the Doppler circuit calculated the other vehicle's speed.

"Someone's shifting it," remarked Tait, watching a pair of flaring, red bars sweeping left into a transfer lane.

The driver of a high-performance *Sprinter JvX* circled the roundabout at high speed and aimed his vehicle at a cross-over bridge. He took his eyes from the road long enough to grin at his companion and make sure that she was ready for action. "Now!" said Charles Demirell.

With a matching fiendish grin, Antoinette Farges lifted a security cage on the dashboard. She dabbed at a red-glowing button with her left thumb.

Two hundred yards beyond the crossover bridge, Lesley Talbot passed the cigarette to her driver and produced a brush to remove tangles from her dark curls. Corin Tait no longer needed to spend money on hairbrushes. Grinding, splintering noises followed a muffled bang in the engine compartment behind them. Talbot paused in mid-brush.

The speedometer began to unwind. Tait tugged at the steering wheel as the road straightened. The power servos were frozen, leaving the transiter curving in a gentle arc to the left. Emergency brakes took hold as the downward slope of the carriageway began to restore the vehicle's speed. Talbot and Tait were thrown against their seat-belts when the transiter jolted into the soft, steep bank beyond the hard shoulder. The heavy vehicle ran on for a few yards, then slid back to a halt.

"Are you all right, Les?" said her driver.

Talbot rubbed her head to ease the effects of a minor impact on a side window. "Just about," she gasped. "What the fervoek happened?"

"Sounds like the turbine tried to mince itself." Tait fumbled with the controls unsteadily, trying to operate auxiliary power switches. All four headlights had failed. The instrument panel was dead.

"Company," warned Talbot.

A pair of lights slowed, then turned off the opposite carriageway of the expressway to approach them along the *Police Only* strip on the central reservation. Although softened by the downpour, the squat outline of the patrol car was unmistakable. A broad, yellow stripe with black edges circling the pale vehicle identified it as belonging to the Traffic Division of the Civilian Security Police. It was clearly on the way to render assistance to the stricken vehicle.

"Just what we need," groaned Tait. "The ganar Prots. Think they'll leave us alone if you give them a nice smile?"

"It's going to take more than a smile to stop them if they want a look in the trailer," said Talbot gloomily.

Without warning, milky, crazed splashes stitched across the patrol car's bullet-proof windscreen. The vehicle dug its nose toward the ground as the driver stood on his brakes, then it squealed into reverse.

"What's up with them?" frowned Talbot in the transiter, noting the retreat but not the reason for it.

"Good shooting, Charles!" cheered Antoinette Farges, clutching the guard rail of the crossover bridge as she bounced up and down in delight, the heavy rain forgotten.

Demirell took aim at the patrol car again, and triggered off another burst from his assault rifle.

Responding to the only visible target, the small turret behind the patrol car's driver swung toward the transiter. Smoke, flames, cannon shells raked the vehicle's cab and the trailer. Talbot and Tait flung themselves to the floor as a laminated window surrendered to an impossible overload. Talbot forced her door open and slid to the ground in the shelter of the transiter, followed closely by her driver.

A spark ignited alcohol vapour. With a soft *plop*, the expressway caught fire as illegally imported, Norland uisge flooded by the gallon from shattered bottles in the trailer. Lesley Talbot and her driver could only run or burn. They tried to reach the top of the bank on their left, slipping and sliding on wet grass, zigging and zagging desperately to evade spotlights and clawing fire from a light machine gun.

Talbot zigged left – into a storm of flying earth and grass. Her

shattered body tumbled back down the slope and into the lake of burning uisge. Tait zagged right, and managed to reach the top of the bank and safety in a flying dive.

One hundred and fifty yards away, watching the drama by white street lights and the ghostly, blue flicker of burning spirits, Charles Demirell thumbed back the safety catch and retracted the open stock of his Bakersfield assault rifle.

"Not a bad effort," he remarked. The words were Ferran, the common language of Camerland and Norland, but the accent Atmain-Belldan from the continental mainland.

"An excellent job, Charles," said Farges, a severe, gnome-like figure in a dripping coveret. She was living up to an old nickname again – *Tiger* pronounced as a Belldan word.

"Right, let's be on our way." Becoming aware again of the cold, driving rain, Demirell hurried back to the shelter of their vehicle. "You can drive."

Farges shed her waterproof coveret in a smooth movement and slipped behind the steering wheel. As she accelerated away, looking for signs to guide her to the eastbound carriageway of a connecting expressway, Demirell started to dry his rifle prior to disassembling and packing into a battered, brown leather business case.

"One less competitor," he remarked. "And some very dry customers wanting an alternative source of illegal booze."

"The Duke will be pleased," smiled Farges, still bubbling with the excitement of an operation in the field. She was a young fifty – over twenty years older than Demirell, her boss. She had spent a great many years behind a desk before he had brought new possibilities into her dull life.

Left behind on the other expressway, the traffic police scout car moved to the shelter of the next crossover bridge, safely uphill of the burning river. The transiter's fuel tank exploded, swamping blue flames with a flare of red and yellow, casting bright tongues and black smoke to the black sky. All three occupants of the police car cringed instinctively as the shock wave of the explosion rocked their vehicle.

More uisge flooded from the trailer, prolonging the battle between elfin combustion and rainy dilution. The torrent from the skies had to win in the end, but it could not hope for success for some considerable time to come.

02. *The Duke of Atmain*

The self-made Duke of Atmain had grown up with the name of one of the Republic of Belldon's most noble families, even though he and his parents were Camerlish born and bred. Discreet genealogists had discovered that his great-great-grandfather had taken the name Chatelle in preference to Tylehand, which had once described a very humble category of peasant. Any links to the Belldan Chatelles were remote and debatable.

Plain Norman Chatelle had taken over the family waste disposal business in eastern Camerland at an early age due to a combination of his father's illness and a lack of enthusiasm on the part of his two brothers. He had been one of the first private contractors to exploit recycling of refuse on a major scale, developing a processing complex known as a *Refuse Reclamation Centre*, a title which had proved popular with his imitators.

At such a centre, an advanced sorting system extracts reusable materials – paper, glass, plastics, metals, etc. – and reusable fabricated items from household and commercial waste. The remaining combustible material is then either compressed into standard pellets for use in solid-fuel heating plants, or incinerated immediately in the reclamation centre's power generation plant, which also provides heating for nearby shops, offices and homes. Ash and other non-combustible residues are assessed for toxicity and may be used to fill unwanted holes in the ground if they cannot be used as fillers to extend plastics and other products.

Although his empire had once covered a large part of the east and south of his native Camerland, Norman Chatelle had chosen to cross the Straits of Atmain to take up residence in the department of that name. It had been a case of great wealth and influence chasing the promise of even more of both.

The Belldan government had allowed him to buy a vacant title by paying off back-taxes on a castle with a history that stretched back eight centuries and a view from its hill top of the southern suburbs of Cavenne, the departmental capital. Liberal grants and tax concessions had allowed him to make Atmain the focus of refuse reclamation technology in Belldon. Bringing work and prosperity to the area had generated enormous quantities of goodwill, that necessary intangible of business.

Five years on from establishing a growing chain of refuse reclamation centres, and restoring and remodelling the castle into a modern business

headquarters, Norman Chatelle's honeymoon period was coming to an end. He was having to employ an expanding security force to protect his business premises and his castle from vandals and terrorists. As time eroded memories, he was slipping from the position of benefactor to just one more foreign exploiter.

Even his former tax advantages were disappearing. The Belldan government was eager to recover its investment. A group of his sometime competitors in his native land had succeeded in convincing the Camerlish government to accept less grasping tax rates as the price of their cooperation in an internationally funded scheme to export their technology to countries with lots of refuse and no efficient means of recycling it. As before, Norman Chatelle, Duke of Atmain, could see a rosy horizon across the sea.

Disillusioned by Belldan ingratitude, Chatelle had been attempting for eight months to re-establish a toe-hold in Camerland. Ninety per cent of the reclamation business there was controlled by the Refuse Barons – all entitled, by birth or political patronage, to the title baronet or baroness, each based in one of the nine counties. The rest of the market was shared by a host of small operators. It was in this latter area that Chatelle had been making his penetration.

The nine Refuse Barons refused to become ten. Chatelle had been forced to take over by proxy small, often family businesses, which his staff then expanded under the original name. His piece-meal acquisitions were much less cost-effective than any of the giants, but a process of consolidation was in hand.

In order to create business to fill newly expanded capacity, members of Chatelle's security staff, led by second-in-command Charles Demirell, had been waging a campaign of sabotage against the Camerlish Refuse Barons' premises since the beginning of the year. Demirell had broken the trail back to his employer by infiltrating a political group called the Popular Socialist Front.

Its members believed that the PSF was fighting social injustice by challenging the Refuse Barons' tough attitude to trade federations and worker participation in the business decisions. The PSF's leadership was prepared to ignore the law of the land if it stood in their way. Demirell was supplying a deniable action wing of the ostensibly political movement with arms and information, and suggesting targets without seeming to do so.

Such direct action by extremists was becoming more common as the political climate changed in Camerland. The country was a constitutional monarchy with a figurehead royal family, like neighbouring

Norland. A fickle, if not cynical, electorate kept Camerland rocking constantly between small-time capitalism and intrusive socialism.

Years of indifferent government, poor service at inflated rates, worst quality goods at premium prices, disruption of all aspects of life by industrial strife – all this had contributed to reduced public morale and stiffening resistance to authority. Thus fringe groups, like the PSF, were forced into increasingly violent excesses to gain attention.

Reasoning that the PSF would have chosen the wealthy and influential Refuse Barons as a natural target, Norman Chatelle viewed Demirell's activities as no more than aggravation of the inevitable. Yet he had taken pains to conceal the true scope of Demirell's mission from the rest of his senior security and business staff.

They knew only that Demirell was sneaking into the Camerlish refuse reclamation market by the back door, and beefing up security at the new reclamation centres in a violent, neighbouring country. A respectable businessman and a duke could not admit to being involved in illegal activities, but he could enjoy his involvement in private.

It was toward such enjoyment that the Duke of Atmain headed on Mid-Year Day morning. His destination was his map room to receive a report from Charles Demirell. The map room lay on the ground floor of the castle's round keep. As usual, the Duke took a short cut along one of the numerous concealed passages which burrowed through the granite-textured concrete of reconstructed walls.

He stepped into a public corridor, emerging from behind a modern tapestry which depicted the warlike achievements of one of his adopted ancestors. A movement at the ceiling of the passage caught his eye. One of the many surveillance cameras, which covered all corridors and public rooms, focussed on him briefly. Even the Duke's office was included in the surveillance network, the camera feeding a recorder, which could be accessed only on the Duke's authority or in an emergency.

An iron-shod, blackened-eichen door opened automatically as he reached the map room. The Duke crossed the rush-pattern carpet to the swivelling armchair at the head of the dormant map table, tugging open the throat-to-waist seal on his sober, summer jacket. Hush screens on the open windows facing him filtered out the sounds of a squad of castle guards being drilled in the courtyard but allowed the fragrance of the rose garden to fill the room. At precisely ten hours, the videolink began to chime a call signal.

The Duke stopped toying with the enormous seal ring on the fourth finger of his left hand. He touched the accept key, completing a satellite

link with a minor Refuse Reclamation Centre on the outskirts of Duddling, which lies just across the Straits of Atmain in Neal county of Camerland, the reclamation territory of The Crane Group.

The videolink's screen swirled from a mirror to a holographic projection, peeling twenty-four years and a moustache from the reflection, and replacing a pale complexion with a lightly tanned face. Charles Demirell was twenty-eight. His right eyebrow was slightly higher than the left and his mouth sloped in the same direction. Pale blue eyes, said by some to be the mark of a killer, gazed calmly from beneath heavy brows. Concave cheeks traced a catenary between prominent cheek bones and jaw. His razor-cut, dark hair had been arranged in a style which disguised its retreat.

The Duke of Atmain had close-cropped, salt and pepper hair, brown eyes, a plump face and a mouth which could set into a hard, obstinate line. Given the choice, he would have become a double of his ruthless, buccaneering, deputy security executive. Twenty-eight-year old Charles Demirell had the looks, the air of youthful authority and the confidence necessary for success in boardroom or bedroom. He would look at home in the ranks of the aristocracy.

Demirell was careful about his appearance. His staff accused him of vanity, but only behind his back. He could pass from tranquillity to fury in a microsecond. Like his employer, he maintained a comprehensive mental register of slights, real and imagined. Like his employer, he could be very generous to those in his favour.

Demirell was sitting in a small, dingy office, which looked as if it belonged to a small firm with no budget for improving its image and no inclination to do so anyway. The square clock on the wall behind him, just visible over his right shoulder, was showing 10:01.

"I think we can go straight to the report." The Duke cut short preliminary greetings that Demirell offered in Belldan, the business language of the castle.

"Yes, sir." Demirell released data via the keyboard of his videolink. The Duke's map table glowed into life. Black decay spots peppered a pale green map of Camerland, overflowing the border with Norland.

The Duke leaned forward to inspect the one by two yard display, presenting his left ear to the videolink camera.

"Current market share?" he prompted.

"Five per cent, sir," said Demirell. "We expect to double this by the end of the year. Our competitors are finding it increasingly difficult to fulfill their disposal and materials contracts." The satellite link was both sealed and scrambled to permit such confidences.

"And consequent power generation and heating contracts." The Duke nodded and expressed his satisfaction by smoothing his neat moustache with finger and thumb.

Demirell read the message behind the comment. "The PSF are reluctant to execute more than token attacks on RecCens, sir. Their aims are to broaden negotiating rights and to redistribute the Refuse Barons' wealth by forcing them to spend more on defence, thus redirecting that wealth into their members' pockets. Consequently, their aim is disruption rather than destruction of RecCens."

"If they blow up the odd incinerator plant, that would redistribute wealth towards the building industry, Charles."

"I'll suggest that to them, sir. If it doesn't work, there's always deception."

"Rapid action, Charles," ordered the Duke in his most commanding tone. "Our new RecCen in the north-east has been lying virtually idle for over a month. The Mirbank merger should be recouping its cost by now."

"Yes, sir." Demirell projected total competence. "We're five per cent over budget on expenditure at the moment," he added apologetically. "Equipment losses have been rather high. The PSF have been using NeoKirlans for some of their more spectacular operations. And as *their* aim is only to get themselves killed with as much noise and blood as possible, just like good throw-backs to more barbaric times, we have to write off everything issued to them."

"How much more do you need?" said the Duke. His trust in his lieutenant was complete. Demirell had a bright future in his service – bright enough to keep his hand out of the till.

"A further six per cent for the next two months should see us through a bad patch, sir. We should be well established in the network of smugglers by then."

"Progress there?" invited the Duke, stuffing his pipe.

"Excellent," beamed Demirell. "Farges and I reduced the competition by one last night. She's a natural for that business. She produces some very productive ideas."

"Good!" The Duke spilled clouds of bluish smoke to hide an expression of surprise. He found it strange that Antoinette Farges, a fifty-year-old widow with a grown-up family, should suddenly discover a talent for smuggling, and that a woman two years younger than himself would have the courage to take the risks involved. "Have you had any dealings with a man called Ambrose Mellbury?" The Duke returned to the topic under discussion. "A prominent Camerlish smuggler."

"Calls himself Ambrose of Nottridge, sir." Demirell nodded with an expression of contempt. "Too big to eliminate just yet. His organization would just fragment, leaving us with a host of new competitors. Is he causing trouble?"

"He imports heavily from our side of the South Channel. But he refused to accept Ashley's protection in return for a share of his profits. He needs a lesson."

"Sandford and Farges have an operation coming up, sir. They plan to use one of the free-lances to link into the northern liquor distribution network. A man called Devrel Sovershend. We could co-ordinate with Ashley to hurt this Mellbury character while we're putting friend Sovershend out of business."

"Yes." The Duke nodded thoughtfully. "I'll tell Ashley to contact you. How far are you from break-even point on the reclamation side?"

"About two months, sir. Our computer projections say we should have filled enough spare capacity by then. And the profits from our smuggling activities should more than pay for the PSF's efforts on our behalf." Demirell dropped a promise and a hint about his budget deficit.

"I'll speak to Lester," said the Duke. "Do something about the Mirbank situation." He nodded a dismissal and broke the connection. Then he keyed an internal videolink number.

George Lester, the Duke's chief financial executive, arrived within minutes of the summons. He was the same age as his employer but he had half as much hair. As if to compensate, his thinning locks contained more black. With almost furtive speed, he slid into the chair beside the map table in order not to tower over the Duke. Lester was a good four inches taller than his very average master, his height emphasized by an intellectual scrawniness. He listened to Demirell's latest demand by proxy for money with his customary air of restrained resignation.

"We shall have considerable difficulty in meeting this request," said Lester when invited to comment. His refined accent was completely natural and contrasted vividly with his employer's slightly common, south-eastern drawl. They both spoke in Ferran, the common language of Camerland and Norland, because Lester had joined Norman Chatelle's organization long before his move across the sea to become a duke in Belldon.

"Considerable?" frowned the Duke. "It seems quite straightforward to me."

"Moving funds across international borders is always a wasteful task. And Demirell really ought to have achieved self-sufficiency by now. I'm finding his returns from our reclamation centres in Camerland rather

difficult to unravel. Even though he uses our system and some of my staff." Noting a look of impatience, Lester decided against suggesting a personal visit to Camerland to audit Demirell's accounts. Neither did he think it politic to suggest that Demirell was syphoning off funds for his personal use. But cash was, without doubt, leaking away somewhere along the line.

"Charles is doing very well under difficult circumstances." The Duke gave a standard reply.

Lester accepted the inevitable with an internal shrug. "Our own investment programme in the south of Atmain has already suffered. Giving more to Demirell would mean delaying our planned expansion of our centre at Dalmain."

The development at Dalmain was Lester's pet project but he recognized that he could do no more than put up a token resistance. His Camerlish obsession had clouded the Duke's business sense and Demirell, whom Lester thought no more than an arrogant and extravagant thug, could do no wrong.

"Delays only?" the Duke said, noticing that his chief financial executive had dried up. "Nothing damaging in the long term?" His tone begged agreement.

"Well, yes," Lester surrendered. "The cost of the building work will increase. Some business will be lost. But I doubt whether it will cripple us." The Duke had never believed in too much democracy. George Lester was well paid. He had long since mastered the art of subjugating his better judgement to the whim of his master.

"Good!" The Duke smiled satisfaction and dismissal.

As Lester crossed the thick carpet to the door, he was already juggling figures in his mind. He almost collided with another visitor as he left. She stepped back from the call button beside the door and allowed the heavy door to close. Lester nodded a greeting, feeling uncomfortable in her presence.

Ilse Dortmann, the security executive and Demirell's nominal superior, was a compact woman with dark blonde hair and penetrating, morning-blue eyes. Her unpainted face was set in its habitual, somehow forceful neutrality – ready to move to laughter, which seemed unlikely under the circumstances, or iron disapproval.

Although three inches short of the average female height, Dortmann projected a brisk competence, which more than compensated for her lack of size. Her dark green uniform combined elegance with a practical, perfectly tailored fit. Her hair completed the paramilitary presentation, the style being reminiscent of a police riot helmet.

"What sort of mood is he in?" said Dortmann, tilting her head back and to the right in a manner which Lester found oddly attractive. The top of her pseudo-riot helmet barely reached his chin.

"Charles is asking for more money again." Lester spoke carefully, aware of the continuous surveillance of the castle's corridors. "But I think there was some good news, too."

"That doesn't sound very promising," sighed Dortmann. "I'm probably wasting my time, speaking to him now."

Lester shrugged. "We can only offer our advice where Charles is concerned. And Norman doesn't have to take it." He flashed a brief smile of sympathy then hurried down the corridor toward the lifts.

Face to face meetings between them were rare. Dortmann knew that Lester's instincts demanded patronizing protection in the presence of a woman a good ten inches shorter and twenty-one years younger than himself. When the woman was more than his equal in a brawl, Lester's reaction was nervous unease. Dortmann knew from her training in the assessment of human strengths and weaknesses that they communicated most effectively by internal memo or through a third party. Bracing herself for another uncomfortable encounter, she touched the call button. After a moment, it blinked a green invitation to enter.

"Ah, Herta," smiled the Duke, presuming on five years' acquaintance to use her agnomen. He was sitting at the control panel of his map table but the display was dark.

"Good morning, sir," said Dortmann formally.

"You're looking rather grim." Her employer offered a box of honey-flavoured cigarettes.

Dortmann accepted a light then came straight to the point. "I'm having personnel problems, sir. No sooner do I train somebody to a moderately satisfactory level of command performance than they disappear over to Camerland."

"Demirell is very short of trained leaders, Herta," snapped the Duke in warning,

"Yes, sir," said Dortmann patiently. "But I require notice of these transfers. I detailed Mortlake to carry out a review of security at our reclamation centres at Rivaud and Magarre last week. When I tried to contact him this morning, I learned he'd been in Camerland since last Friday. And that his report and a note of explanation had been mysteriously delayed in the castle's internal mail system." *Presumably, by someone loyal to Demirell*, Dortmann added to herself.

"Unfortunate," said the Duke in a *so what?* tone.

"Exactly the same happened when Demirell transferred Liston, Farges

and Bleiler," Dortmann continued, putting as much urgency as she dared into her voice. "I cannot do my job effectively if I have to waste time keeping track of my senior personnel and reassigning half-completed tasks."

Standard, programmed Belldan acquired a trace of an accent from her native Heitain, Belldon's eastern neighbour. A faint *clunk* when she rested her right forearm on the plastic map table was a reminder that she was wearing a sleeve-gun.

"I'll speak to Demirell," said the Duke round a mouthful of pipe.

"I think a direct order would be more appropriate," said Dortmann as firmly as she dared. "The same thing is happening to Westwood. He has just lost Ashley from the castle guard. With the same story – your special orders."

"These are difficult times." The Duke refused to admit that he, not Demirell, had given Gail Ashley her special assignment. "We must all cope as best we can."

"Yes, sir," said Dortmann in meaningless agreement.

Her fruitless protest made, she snapped off a salute and left the Duke alone to resume his study of Demirell's reports. Dortmann retired to her office on the top floor of the southeastern tower of the keep. She dropped wearily onto the chair behind her desk.

The Mortlake incident was just one more in a long series of pecks at her authority. Charles Demirell had grown from willing pupil to virtual equal, thanks to the expansion into Camerland. Despite her training and experience, the internal political situation in the Duke's Belldan empire was beginning to wear Dortmann down. In addition to the disruption caused by Demirell's press-ganging of her senior security staff, she had also to cope with his alarming inroads into the castle's armoury.

Demirell had requisitioned offensive as well as defensive weapons. Dortmann suspected that he was involved in more than just taking control of a chain of minor Refuse Reclamation Centres under the collective noses of the Camerlish Refuse Barons. That he had chosen only those members of the security staff whose personality profile indicated a willingness to take risks and cut corners suggested that Demirell's other project involved illegal activities.

Dortmann recognized that her increased smoking and recent difficulty in sleeping were symptoms of growing frustration. She could still command the loyalty and respect of most of her staff, but the partiality of her employer prevented her from countering Demirell's divisive influence. Professional pride made her reluctant to give up the power struggle, yet the bond of conspiracy between the Duke and Demirell

could only undermine her position further.

The time had come for a change, but she had to proceed with caution. Demirell was aware of her suspicions – that much was clear from his evasive responses to her demands for more accurate reports on his activities. If he were to learn that she intend to leaving the Duke's service, he would feel bound to take steps to neutralize a potential threat. Demirell would have no respect for her personal integrity. He would not expect her to be bound by the confidentiality clauses in her contract, and Dortmann knew that Charles Demirell's personality profile suggested that he might not stop short of murder.

Thus Ilse Dortmann continued to serve the self-made Duke of Atmain to the best of her considerably abilities, while waiting for the right time to escape.

03. Devrel Sovershend In Norland

The young boy on an electric-blue trail-bike waved a news sheet and called a cheerful greeting to the couple relaxing on a grassy bank. Devrel Sovershend, holovision service engineer and free-lance smuggler, shielded his eyes against the descending sun of a Norlish evening as he tried to squint at the headlines. The boy braked abruptly and dropped the news sheet back into the basket clipped to his handlebars.

"Oh, no!" he called in a ten-year-old demi-yell.

Sovershend called him a Norlish miser as he fumbled in a pocket of his jacket. He located a ten-shilling piece by touch and flipped the oval coin to the youngster, who caught it cleanly.

The neighbouring kingdoms had equivalent and interchangeable currencies. The boy pretended to spit in disgust on a Camerlish coin before wheeling his trail-bike up the gentle slope. Camerland and Norland also shared a common language, which had been brought across the Inland Sea by Ferran conquerors in the mists of history.

"Will I keep the change?" The boy grinned cheekily as he rattled his pouch of small change threateningly.

"Go on, then," said Sovershend resignedly. "I'm not walking home with a limp for you, you little grabber."

"Thanks very much, Vr. Sovershend. You're not bad for a Camer," grinned the red-haired grabber.

"And you, James Allender, are no worse than the rest of your kind and no better than you have to be."

The boy seemed to take the opinion as a compliment. He handed

over the news sheet, then pointed to Katuishann's recumbent form. "Another for the lady?" he asked hopefully.

"What lady?" said Sovershend. Katuishann prodded him in the ribs with an elbow. "I didn't know you were awake, korolan."

"Well, I am, so watch it," said Katuishann in her lazy, too precise Ferran.

"She can read this one," Sovershend told the boy, who hopped back onto his trail-bike and rolled away with a wave.

"What's in the news?" said Katuishann sleepily. "I'm surprised they deliver out here in the country."

Sovershend unfolded the tabloid of recycled paper, which was denoted by the circle of four mutually assaulting arrows around the price. "He always takes a few extra for passing trade when he delivers to the farms up the road. The news: it's mostly tomorrow's coronation. I suppose all you women will be glued to your vids, soaking up every second of it."

"I think that's meant to be an insult." Katuishann attacked him with her elbow again.

"Remind me to wear my bullet-proof jacket next time I take you anywhere." Sovershend rolled away from her, laughing.

Katuishann pursued him on her knees, brushing wisps of darker yellow, dried grass from her lemon one-piece. She was tall, with a naturally athletic figure, a shoulder-length cascade of dark chestnut hair and arresting, brown eyes.

"You're all grassy, Dev," she laughed.

Sovershend submitted to a very pleasant, de-grassing operation in an undeclared truce.

"Will this affect your business?" Katuishann added. "The dangerous one?"

"Significantly," said Sovershend. "When the Nors celebrate getting a new king by abolishing more of the duty on spirits made locally, they'll bring the cost down to half the shop price back home. There's bound to be a rush of amateurs border-running. Which means the Camerlish CustEx will be making an extra effort to stop it – to collect our horrendous duty and the dreaded Counter Alcoholism Tax."

"And where does that leave you, Dev?"

"As long as people continue to exploit my weakness, I'm afraid it's business as usual."

"Weakness?" Katuishann frowned at him. "I didn't know you had any. What is it? I want to use it to make you stop taking these risks."

"I wish you'd believe the risks are extremely minimal."

"Come on," insisted Katuishann. "What's your weakness?"

"I can't refuse an overpaid job," laughed Sovershend.

"You mercantile swine!" laughed Katuishann. "Or should that be mercenary?"

"I think they both fit. Which isn't bad for someone who's only been speaking our language for four months. I never really believed electronic language programming could work. Squirting grammar and vocabulary directly into the brain always seemed so unlikely."

"Don't change the subject," ordered Katuishann, who came from Kraagen, Norland's nearest neighbour across the Inland Sea. "Wouldn't it be better for you to lay low for a while?"

"I'm going to for the next couple of days. Until you desert me on Thursday."

"Unless you get a better offer?" Katuishann's smile robbed the remark of all sting.

"Scepticism doesn't become you, korolan." Sovershend threw a handful of dried grass at her.

"Hey!" Katuishann combed her dark hair with red-nailed fingers. "Are we going back now? It's ages since lunch."

Sovershend glanced at his watch. "Fourteen past eighteen. Is that a plane going over or your stomach rumbling?"

"Do you want a fight?" said Katuishann fiercely.

"I'll settle for a hand up." Sovershend extended his left arm. Katuishann gripped it and heaved with surprising strength. She was a very deceptive lady in many ways. Then she let go. Sovershend flopped back, performed a backward roll and leapt athletically to his feet. "That's not going to work a second time, sneaky Tish," he laughed.

They rejoined the track to continue their return journey through undulating farmland to the small, rural guesthouse. Norland was enjoying a sunny Mid-Year Day. Their summer usually began with cool, showery weather. The holidaymakers were hoping for two more days of fair weather until Katuishann flew back across the Inland Sea to her native Kraagen and Devrel Sovershend returned to illegal imports.

Sovershend was following a tradition which stretched back hundreds of years. Norland's wilder country and its generally more scattered population were said to be responsible for a more liberal attitude to government and greater individual freedom than was permitted in the neighbouring kingdom of Camerland.

As oil had started to flow ashore from the new fields in the northern half of the Inland Sea, so Norland's indirect taxes had been reduced. Inhabitants of the nominally divided island had a choice between the

harder, cheaper life in Norland and the softer, more expensive existence in the south. It was the ambition of most of them to spend a Camerlish salary at Norlish prices. Sovershend and his colleagues helped to make a part of this dream come true.

The photographs on Devrel Sovershend's various identity documents showed a pleasant, quite handsome and possibly intelligent face, which was relaxed in untroubled neutrality. His passport gave his height as an inch and a half short of six feet. His identity card made him an inch taller. The contradiction was typical of the deliberate misinformation spread by someone who flirted with the law of the land.

In the flesh, he was lean without reaching skinny and he carried himself with the confidence of a confirmed lone wolf. His elastic conscience gave him a self-image of a provider of small luxuries for those who would not be able to afford them otherwise. He saw nothing wrong with breaking a bad law, but he was no champion of the oppressed. Smuggling was very rewarding, if risky, occupation and it was becoming more and more attractive as a way of earning a living as Norland and Camerland grew apart.

An increasingly pragmatic approach to law enforcement in Camerland meant that the penalty for revenue evasion tended to be a massive fine. Current official opinion deemed it more sensible to demand that certain classes of criminal should contribute to the exchequer rather than draining it in an expensive prison cell for a number of wasted years.

If not overtaken by disaster in the meantime, Sovershend planned to become respectable at about thirty-five, in three years' time. His 'career' as a holovision service engineer with the small Levington firm Semigrant & Harker, which paid his national and local taxes and explained away a better than average income, would come to an end at that point.

Sovershend intended to devote his declining years to a study of the finer things in life. He believed that his allotted span should have more to offer than sixteen years' education, followed by forty years of working four days a week for all but six weeks of the year, and then a graceless slide into the wasteland of retirement. In his opinion, the grey alternative justified taking a few risks and breaking unpopular laws.

Thursday, Halgary 18th

04. Mortlake & Pinder with the PSF

A heavy, afternoon mist from the reservoirs cloaked the Kelsreach Hills, creating pockets of diffuse openness at dips in the soaring and descending road. Neil Pinder was hopelessly lost in the wild borderland between the counties Norton and Dunstan. He knew only that their van was about forty miles south of the border with Norland.

Gary Mortlake seemed to know his exact position. He had not glanced at the map since entering the mist belt. He seemed to be ignoring the proximity scope display repeated on the bottom-right corner of the windscreen. Pinder could not be sure where his team-leader was looking. Mortlake's eyes were directed straight ahead, where the road was usually to be found, but they had a glazed, unfocussed quality in his reflection. Pinder oscillated between gratitude for the mist-blanket that hid the frequent, steep plunges at the side of the road, and alarm because Mortlake seemed to be turning the steering wheel purely from memory. Uncertainty made Pinder nervous.

After checking once more that his seat web was properly secured, Pinder popped a mint into his mouth and attempted to ignore his teamleader. Mortlake had an annoying habit of whistling snatches of contemporary tunes, then breaking off just when Pinder was on the point of identifying the song. Frequent protests during their six months as a team in the Duke of Atmain's security department had made absolutely no impression on his colleague. As they were both in their late twenties, Mortlake's authority tended to be purely nominal and very lightly carried.

Two plunges from the mist later, Mortlake stopped the van in a clear pocket in the mist blanket. "We're here," he announced in a self-satisfied tone as he switched off the engine. "Vr. ganar Demirell's rendezvous point."

"How can you tell?" said Pinder sceptically. "It all looks the same to me. Bockan countryside." He was Camerlish, but from an urban background.

Mortlake tapped his large nose. "It's all a matter of following this," he replied cheerfully.

"Fair enough." Pinder broke into a grin for the first time that afternoon. "But there's so much of it, how do you know which way it's pointing?"

"S'vogan!" invited Mortlake, pretending to be deeply offended. He had lived with the nose for twenty-seven years. He doubted whether there was an original way left to insult it. He had grown up on a hill farm in Stanton county, in south-west Camerland. He felt at home in wild country.

"They're late." Pinder reached into a tangle of limp, mousey hair to scratch his left ear. "They should have been here at fifteen-fifteen."

"So are we," Mortlake pointed out. "It's twenty-five past now. Ah, here they are."

A similar light-coloured van sped down the road toward them, bursting out of the mist at reckless speed. It appeared to be as nondescript and neglected as their own at first glance. Even the characterless shade of mid-blue resembled the 'crystallized sapphire' of their compact, *Rutland Explorer* van. Then Mortlake noticed the date letter in the registration. The newly arrived vehicle was less than two years old. It scraped along a roadside boulder and squealed to a halt behind the Duke's men.

"Took your time, didn't you?" called Mortlake as if he had been waiting for several hours.

"The fog slowed us down," said Brooks, the driver of the other van.

Brooks was a very close match to Mortlake's image of an urban revolutionary. He certainly had the moustache for it, and his black hair was cropped in a fairly military style. Shaw, his much older companion, looked too well fed and too close to pension age to be of much use on the barricades. Mortlake dismissed him as someone who took a collection box round at Popular Socialist Front rallies.

"Here we are, then." Mortlake unlocked the doors at the back of his van. "The oblong cases are weapons, the square ones are ammo."

Brooks and Shaw heaved four dark green boxes to their van.

"Be careful with this." Mortlake slid a brown plastic beer-crate to the rear of his van. "It's got the demolition charges in it. They're in *red* wrappers. And these are the smoke bombs." He peeled an improvised cover from another beer-crate.

"Something new, are they?" said Brooks.

"Right," said Mortlake. "They look a bit like the demolition charges, so we've given them *green* wrappers. To let them off, you just pull the tab and the wrapper drops apart. Then you get hold of the ring round the bottom half and turn it as if you're screwing it together. Clockwise,

right? As far as it'll go. About a quarter turn."

"No safety pins to pull out," Shaw remarked.

"I hope your lads won't be too disappointed," said Mortlake.

"I don't think they'll be too bothered as long as there's plenty of smoke in them," said Brooks.

"No worry about that. Here, I'll give you a demo." Mortlake reached into the crate apparently casually, but he selected a smoke bomb that activated the sensor in his signet ring, which vibrated invisibly on his finger.

"Can I have a look at it?" said Shaw.

"Why not?" Mortlake tossed the green-wrapped canister to him, then dipped into the crate again. It contained three genuine, finger-tingling, smoke bombs. "Right! Wrapper off. Hold this ring and turn. See how this bit snaps inwards after a quarter-turn? That sets the fuse going." He bounced the smoke bomb in his hand. "Then you've got thirty seconds to get rid of the sobok."

Mortlake turned and threw it into a grassy hollow strewn with damp, greyish boulders. Dense green fog jetted violently from the device, filling the depression in seconds. The surrounding mist began to take on a green tinge, lurching gently in great, uneasy billows as it acquired contrast.

"Once you've blown a hole in the roof of the incinerator plant with the demolition charges, half a dozen of these should fill it up with smoke nicely," Mortlake said cheerfully. "And give them soboks at Mirbank something to think about."

"Just what we need." Shaw slipped the other smoke bomb casually into a side pocket of his waterproof coveret. "They should show the so-called Refuse Barons just how useless their security is but cause a minimum of damage."

"Yeah, you'll certainly show the soboks a thing or two," grinned Mortlake. "Well, we'd better get moving again."

"Us too," said Brooks. "See you again next time."

"See you," said Pinder, speaking for the first time and proving that he had a tongue in his head.

The vans moved off in opposite directions as the green-tinted fog began to spill out of the hollow and onto the road.

"Pair of yadren! I bet they won't be around when the fun starts," Mortlake said before returning to his aimless staring through the windscreen.

"Priyam!" agreed Pinder. He reached forward to switch on the radio as a defence against his colleague's intermittent whistling.

The programme on *Radio Bylstock*, from the county's largest town, was pretty dreadful but it was marginally more entertaining than the noise of the van's engine. The presenter's inane chatter reminded Neil Pinder of the nauseating character who chaired the cheap and cheerful mid-afternoon programme on *Radio Atmain*.

A two-hour drive lay ahead of the Duke of Atmain's agents. When they reached their destination, they would be in nice time for the worst of the evening rush hour.

"I wonder what Louise is planning for dinner?" said Mortlake during a pause between tunes.

"Something Belldan, I think," said Pinder.

"A welcome change from our poor efforts."

"Bockan priyam," grunted Pinder. "You won't starve on our cooking, but it does get a lot boring."

Life in Camerland did not agree with Neil Pinder. He was a natural castle-dweller, who preferred proper meals every day of the week. His companions were much more adaptable. They could even laugh at the result when Gary Mortlake decided to cook instead of just bashing open tins or packs of convenience food.

A natural pessimist, Pinder would expect to become fish-food if dropped by parachute into the ocean. Louise Liston and Gary Mortlake would expect to land on the sun deck of a cruise liner and receive a first-class passage courtesy of a passing millionaire. Were it not for the excellent pay, Pinder would have resigned from the Duke of Atmain's service and moved to neighbouring Heitain. That country's main artery, the River Zinder, was dotted with castles, according to the holovision holiday features.

Friday, Halgary 19

05. Safe Storage

One of the Coastguard radar plots off the Esham coast was a fishing boat carrying cargo. It was a damp, overcast day on which land, Inland Sea and sky merged at the horizon. A musical chatter from the echosounder filled the bridge. The radar set on the vessel had an incurable fault. A hefty thump in the usual place just below the screen had produced an image twice, and black smoke and a smell of burning on the third and last occasion. The skipper was navigating quite satisfactorily by remaining just in sight of land and by following the contours of the sea bed.

He turned to starboard when he picked up the line of buoys which marked the approaches to the River Barton. A gigantic oil barge heaved into view, moving away from the dock complex on the Esham side of the river, which formed the county boundary with Neal. The barge grew to monstrous proportions before disappearing into the grey mist to the east.

The skipper of the fishing boat stretched out an arm to pick up the bridge telephone. He pressed the second of the row of buttons beneath the receiver rest. "How about some coffee up here?" He made a suggestion of the order.

"Just pouring it now," said the deck hand from the galley. "How do you always know when a new brew's ready?"

"Put plenty of sugar in it. It's the only way anyone can drink that synthetic stuff."

The skipper replaced the telephone and peered through the droplet-speckled glass of the wheelhouse to check his position. The tide was pushing him over to the southern, Neal county side of the wide river.

"Coffee-flavoured sugar," announced the deck hand. He was eighteen years old and tall enough to have to remember to duck his head when entering the wheelhouse. His broad grin showing off white teeth broke a deep, summer tan. He slotted the mug into the gimballed holder on the arm of the captain's chair, then stepped back one pace and saluted.

"If you knew anything about the Navy, sunshine, you'd know only Perrians salute without a hat on." The skipper was a mature twenty-

nine. He had gained his military knowledge from watching holovision.

"What do you do instead?" prodded the deck hand. This was his first smuggling trip. Anxiety had given way to a certain cheeky relief as the end of the trip approached and none of the terrible catastrophes of his imagination had overtaken them.

The skipper lit a cigarette to give himself time to think. A buzz from the telephone saved him. The engineer wanted to know what had happened to his synth-café.

Ten minutes later, Shear Island loomed out of a rain squall. Rounding the flat, rocky blob on the southern side, the fishing boat chugged into the sound between Shear and the neighbouring Isle of Elmer. The glint of a stray sunbeam on glass told the skipper that someone at Shear's Coastguard station was checking up on him. His vessel had been making the same run regularly for two months now, with various crews and always with a legitimate cargo. The skipper was confident that there were no outward signs that he was running a special cargo this time.

He could see a large sign reading *Easton Security Products* at his destination – a group of buildings, all less than six months old, which had been artificially aged to blend with Elmer's landscape of spiky grass, low shrubs and lichen-scabbed, bare rock. A sign reading: *Danger! Electrified Fence!* became visible as the fishing boat approached the landing stage.

The skipper edged alongside stained and chipped concrete. Chasing up and down the deck, the hand hurled bow and stern lines at two of the men who were waiting for them. The chug of the engine gave way to a gentle slosh of water on concrete.

"How did it go?" called a tall man on the landing stage. He was wearing a business suit under a transparent waterproof.

"We got buzzed by a Prot chopper a couple of times, but no trouble," called the skipper.

"Right, you lot, get busy," the spokesman told the group in overalls on the landing stage.

"You heard Vr. Richmond," growled the head shifter.

A diesel engine roared into life. The jib of a small crane swung over the hold of the fishing boat, which was apparently loaded with crates of office equipment. Richmond clambered over the rail and let himself into the wheelhouse.

"You know the courier, Sovershend?" said the skipper. "He said he'd take part of the cargo for himself. Said that's how he usually gets paid."

"It's all right," said Richmond with a shark-smile. "He reckons uisge is more inflation proof than cash."

“Just as long as you don’t think I’ve got it stashed away somewhere,” added the skipper lightly.

“This business runs on trust.” Richmond’s smile remained just as comfortable and as confident. “But we know how to take care of twisters,” he added as a routine warning.

06. The Camerlish Refuse Barons & Alex Cardinal

The loose federation of Camerland’s nine Refuse Barons usually met on a convenient Friday in each of the thirteen months to discuss matters of common interest. Their host on this occasion was Sir Christopher Lees, founder and majority shareholder of Midlands Disposal & Reclamation. His headquarters was Refuse House, an imposing structure built entirely of recycled materials in the heart of the business district of Camer. The former capital city, usurped by Leviton, had the advantage of a central location.

The farthest flung of Sir Christopher’s colleagues, Sir Miles Dunstan to the north and Sir Simon Lake to the south, were both less than half an hour by air from Camerland’s capital in ancient times. Ten people had gathered at the round conference table of recycled plastic textured to counterfeit close-grained eichen. The odd man was obviously out.

The others were aged fifty to sixty, or seventy plus. Alex Cardinal of Cardinal Security & Investigation Services had just entered his thirties. He looked older, thanks to a touch of self-inflicted grey in his dark hair. He had a metabolism which kept him looking lean and fit despite an aversion to unnecessary exercise. Dramatic training given by a former girlfriend had left him with the ability to set his features in an expression appropriate to his client’s tale – intelligence, concentration, compassion, etc. – while his thoughts explored other aspects of the problem.

His eyes were dark brown and ‘frank’, according to a character-analysis scheme in a former secretary’s magazine. He also had ‘sexy’ eyebrows. His height was average, his birthday March 7th and his summer-weight business suit in a pale shade known as *safari blue* had been bought off the peg. The garment’s main selling point was flared sleeves with room to conceal the needle-gun on his left forearm.

Sir Nigel Grantby, the Refuse Barons’ chairman for the year, exchanged a final word with the comparative youngster of a visitor, then he rapped on the table with a thick-bottomed glass. He was a large, shaggy, self-made man in his middle fifties, sheathed in dark blue over a pure white pullover.

His business empire lay to the south of Camer, but there was more

than a trace of a northern accent in his forceful delivery. "Can we get started, vreitei?" Grantby's gaze travelled round the table to check conversation.

"About time," muttered Lady Amy Tynsdale, the oldest of the group, whose territory was Esham county.

"For those who haven't met him yet, this is Alex Cardinal." Grantby turned a large, left hand toward the visitor. "A security consultant and investigator. He's found out some very interesting things over the last few weeks. Things that prove I've not gone soft between the ears," he added with a note of triumph.

"We didn't actually say that, Nigel," cackled the skeletal owner of Lake Reclamation, which serviced the western toe of Camerland.

"More that you had a mild obsession," added Lady Mary Thorne, Lake's neighbour to the south east. Her accent was unashamedly Norlish.

"Cardinal?" Grantby invited to move the meeting on.

Cardinal pushed out of a chair made of recycled steel and plastic which was virtually indistinguishable from black leather. The yard-square holovision screen on the Dalmain mustard wall behind him swirled from a pastoral scene to a misty grey when he activated the hand controller.

"Good afternoon, vreitei," said Cardinal with a confident smile. "As you know, attacking a target as socially significant as a Refuse Reclamation Centre is a cheap way of getting your cause mentioned in the less reputable news sheets. You've all had trouble at this level, but I was called in to find out why purely nuisance-level raids have been so effective in a suburb of Leviton. Effective enough to put Vr. Grantby's reclamation centre out of commission for three months at first, and out of action again the day after it came back on line.

"We all know about the trend to an increasingly physical element in social protest – malcontents working off their resentment against the cost of living, unemployment, the price of fortbeer, or even the level of a Refuse Baron's profits. You've all had protest meetings outside your gates, trying to disrupt your business for reasons which have little to do with you. I've been looking into why a particular RecCen in the Rogate district of Leviton has suffered so much."

"Just one RecCen?" frowned Sir Christopher Lees, the host. "After all the fuss Nigel was making, I thought half his organization had been wiped out."

"I think you'll find the situation looks a lot more serious as we get into it," said Cardinal.

"It better had be," said Sir Arthur Crane, an impatient character, whose territory was Neal county, which faces Atmain across the Straits. He, too, had a northern accent, but he was in the process of having it smoothed over, which made his delivery somewhat erratic. "I've had a lot more trouble than one RecCen out of action."

"Thanks to Vr. Grantby's powers of persuasion," Cardinal cut across further comment, "I have had access to figures which make up an ugly picture across the national refuse reclamation market. It's rather ironic that I started with Grantby's. As we've just heard, others have suffered much worse disruption, which has put particular reclamation centres in each of your areas out of action for significant periods."

"So what are you telling us that our own security people haven't already?" demanded Crane.

Cardinal sipped at a glass of pale blue liquid to refresh himself, using the pause to select his arguments. "The answer to that lies partly in your earlier reluctance to believe anything other than mindless vandalism is behind the attacks. You weren't prepared to accept the possibility of co-ordination. And you are all business rivals – in methods, if not territorial ambitions. You exchange information cautiously to protect technical secrets, and swap some commercial information relevant to your border areas. Your own staff didn't spot my pattern, Vr. Crane, because the quantities I'm dealing with have to be added up across the country before they become significant."

"How small are these quantities?" persisted Crane.

Cardinal shrugged imperceptibly, resigning himself to having to tell his tale out of sequence. He used the controller to bring a diagram labelled *Market Distribution* onto the screen. It consisted of nine horizontal, black bars, each bearing the name of one of the Refuse Barons, and a shorter, green bar labelled *Others*.

"Your group has traditionally divided nine-tenths of the market between you." Cardinal waved a hand in front of the black bars. "The rest is handled by smaller, independent concerns." He touched the controller again. Very little happened to the black bars but the green bar shot forward, overtaking the longest black bar. "As far as I can tell, your total market share has slipped to eighty-eight per cent over the year, down four per cent, and it's still falling."

An outbreak of surprised and angry mutters interrupted him. Grantby hammered on the table with his glass, having taken the precaution of emptying it first.

"Where's the four per cent gone?" said Sir George Braben, the youngest of the Refuse Barons.

Cardinal addressed a drooping, fiery-red, brush-cut. "There's an independent reclamation centre just outside Rogate in Leviton. The difficulties at Grantby's mean that it now holds most of the contracts for that area."

"No surprise there," said Crane. "You can't let materials pile up in the streets."

"What I found interesting is the centre changed hands about a month before the first serious attack on Grantby's," Cardinal added. "The new owners of what was a family firm have expanded it considerably without drawing attention to themselves. And the firm now belongs, via a series of holding companies, to a company registered on Lesten Island. Which rules out identifying the directors."

The string of islands off the western coasts of Camerland and Norland maintained a high standard of living for their sparse populations by remaining secretive tax havens.

"I get a similar picture from each of the nine counties," continued Cardinal. "More so in the North and East, where the independent Rec-Cens are changing hands and being modernized and expanded without immediate justification. The drop in your market share is camouflaged to some extent by the fact that you're in an expanding market. Your businesses aren't declining, they're just expanding less rapidly than might be expected."

"Projecting from available figures, you stand to lose up to eight per cent of the total market by the end of the year. And if we assume the independents are being taken over by a single organization, its representative will be entitled to a seat at this table in the new year. Because it'll be bigger than any individual here today."

The diagram on the screen changed again. The green bar contracted, splitting off a red bar, which began as solid, angry probability, then softened into misty pink possibility.

"So who's kicking us below the belt?" said Sir John Nash, who was wearing a green-biased flamesuit to brighten the occasion. "And how do we stop them?"

"There are two answers to the first question," said Cardinal. "I've made some progress in one direction, but the other will require further digging. Collecting the data for these diagrams has taken up a lot of time," he added before Sir Arthur Crane could ask what in bock he had been doing for the past few weeks.

"Why two answers?" said Sir George Braben of Lesham county. His tone was apologetic but his gaze at Cardinal was direct enough.

"You're being kicked *below the belt* by those organizing the

disruption, and those organizing the organizers,” said Cardinal. “The first is a grey area. As you can see from the next diagram, vandalism by ‘lensters and sabotage by your own employees are well within the limits predicted by your own security people. The National Temperance Front is making more noise than usual about recycling aluminium for beer cans, but the main growth area, if I dare call it that, appears to be politically inspired sabotage.”

“Which is still criminal damage, whichever way you look at it,” growled Crane. “A crime’s a crime, whether whoever did it wants to be prime minister or just rich.”

“This area is hole-black and about as giving,” said Cardinal. “I have a fair correlation, on shaky data, between the activities of the Popular Socialist Front, admitted and assumed, and your worst troubles.” He tapped a black line on another chart. “You see the number of incidents and their gravity jumps in the early part of this year. This suggests you, collectively, upset the PSF in either January or early February. Their response time to injury, real or imagined, is on the low side.”

“That’s ridiculous,” protested Sir Simon Lake, polishing with his glasses with his tie. “We didn’t have a meeting in January or February. The weather was dreadful and most of us were on holiday, anyway.”

“Which suggests someone is manipulating the PSF,” said Cardinal. “Supplying them with intelligence and materials, and taking considerable commercial advantage from your losses.”

“Who, though?” growled Sir Arthur Crane, directing a menacing glare in Cardinal’s direction.

“At the moment,” he admitted, “I’m up against a stone wall on Lesten Island over the question of ownership of the newly taken-over independents. Breaking through will be expensive and time-consuming. But there is another line of attack,” he added before Crane could release the outburst for which he had drawn an audible breath.

“Which is?” invited Lady Mary Thorne.

“Some of the equipment captured after raids is more advanced than you’d expect of your average urban guerilla. The same applies to the explosive devices, or the dummies planted to bring somewhere to a stand-still until the bomb squad turns up. Both the police and myself are trying to trace the history of the more exotic items. But the trail is a tangled mess, as one would expect.”

“I can’t imagine someone being able to set the PSF on us,” said Sir Miles Dunstan, whose ancestors had given their name to the county in the north-east. He was a spritely seventy-year-old and he wore a blue and white-striped wig instead of a hat. “If you tell that lot to do

something, they do the exact opposite to prove how independent they are.”

“I don’t know, Miles,” countered Lady Tynsdale. She was less than a decade his senior but she looked old enough to be Dunstan’s mother. “Political groups can be manipulated with ridiculous ease if one knows how to go about it.”

“I’d like to manipulate the soboks,” drifted across the table. “With a pair of red-hot pincers.”

“Before we get too carried away.” A Norlish accent cut through the laughter of agreement. Cardinal turned his attention back to Lady Mary Thorne, reflecting that he would like any wife of his to be as youthful and attractive at fifty. “I think Vr. Cardinal would admit,” added Lady Thorne, “he’s been giving us speculation, not facts. I, for one, would like a much closer look at his evidence.”

“Vr. Grantby has agreed to let you have copies of my report.” Cardinal distributed one-inch cubes of off-white plastic, which enclosed easily lost memory wafers. “Which you can discuss with your own security people.”

“Cardinal will continue working for me,” added Grantby. “While everyone else goes through his report.”

“What about future reports?” prodded Sir Christopher Lees, blowing cactus-scented javo smoke at the striped wig opposite.

“Copies of future reports will be available.” Grantby’s tone implied that he expected contributions to share the cost of the investigation.

“But don’t expect too much too fast,” Cardinal warned. “Investigating fringe political groups is delicate work. They can have friends in the most unlikely places. And you usually meet them at very awkward moments.”

“Yes, I think we all have personal experience of that,” said Grantby. “Right! Can you wait in the club room, Cardinal? I’ve still got things to discuss with you.”

“Yes, of course.” Cardinal fished a memory wafer from the holovision set and restored it to its storage cube. “Thank you for your attention, vreitei,” he added formally before exiting discreetly through the door on his right.

Steady employment by an organization large enough to be able to afford a decent scale of charges merited every small courtesy. Cardinal found it quite refreshing to work on a single job instead of having to run for his life around a cluster of small contracts. And he had been able to plant a fair number of favours on fellow investigators and security consultants in Leviton by farming out recent bread-and-butter business.

"Comments?" said Grantby when the investigator had left the room.

"Going along with Mary's reservations about a report we haven't studied," said the youngest baron, "I think getting rid of actively disloyal employees should be a priority. We must be able to find a common way through the legal tangles."

"Sacking people will put you in trouble with the Federation, George." Lees crushed his yellow-wrapped javo into a handy ashtray. "Every one of their bockan members is a blue-eyed boy or girl with a sunburst backside."

"Not necessarily," said Grantby. "Howard Johnson has been making noises about how much work there is to do on that manor house he bought recently. If we can find out what the rest of the Federation's executive want, we may have a basis for bargaining. Saboteurs are just as much an embarrassment to them as us – the ones who won't do a proper day's work as well as the ones who plant bombs."

"Johnson and company could be prepared to say as much in public with a little coaxing. And if we let them seem to screw a bonus out of us, in return for more productivity, of course, it won't do their image as Federation hard men any harm."

"But what about wrapping up the PSF?" insisted Crane.

"Cardinal is working very closely with the police," said Grantby. "But these people tend to be elusive. And getting hold of hard evidence is a severe problem."

"I think what Arthur really means," said Lady Amy Tynsdale, "is that we should be doing something ourselves. Such as preventive strikes into the enemy's camp. Can't that mercenary fellow of yours do something, Nigel?"

"Major Tarpigan's job is to check the history of captured weapons and equipment through channels unavailable to anyone outside his profession," recited Grantby.

"Just the same," said Nash, whose flamesuit appeared to have developed hiccups, "both Cardinal and Major Tarpigan are on your books as security consultants. If the Major chooses to wipe out any PSF members Cardinal identifies, we could claim he exceeded his orders."

"And fire him in a cloud of indignation if he gets caught?" cackled the skeletal Lake.

"It would never work," said Lady Thorne with conviction. "The mire would splash us too."

"I agree with Mary," said Grantby. "Even though the PSF are ignoring the law, I think it's important that we keep our own hands clean. Secrets have a habit of leaking out, no matter what precautions we take to

guard them.”

“A very good point,” said Lady Tynsdale.

“Hmmm!” dragged reluctantly from Crane.

“Can we move on to the next item on the agenda now?” Grantby exerted his influence as chairman.

He could tell that Sir Arthur Crane was still thinking of reprisals. Crane believed that there was no point in achieving a position of power if that power could not be exercised. And he had an impulsive streak. Grantby included in the duties of the Refuse Barons’ chairman, guardianship of the group’s image, acting as a brake on the enthusiasm of leers inhibited members – and also the role of undercover avenging angel.

07. Major Rufus Tarpigan

After the monthly meeting, Sir Nigel Grantby retired to an office on the fifth floor of Refuse House. His watch and the wall clock agreed on 15:19. A neat videolink in a polished cabinet chimed for attention as the clock’s second hand reached a vertical position. Grantby leaned across a gleaming, modern desk to touch the accept and scramble panels simultaneously. An image charged through a series of dizzy and colourful convolutions as a hush screen enclosed him in its blanking embrace. The hologram settled into a determined face framed against the study in Grantby’s Leviton home, fifty-five miles away.

“Good afternoon, Sir Nigel,” said the leader of his small, very select, mercenary band.

“Afternoon, Tarpigan.” Grantby leaned toward the videolink automatically, as if about to share a confidence. “I see you got in all right.”

Major Rufus Tarpigan grinned in a wolfish-friendly fashion, displaying large, even, white teeth. His age lay somewhere between Cardinal’s thirty-one and about forty. A complexion darkened by recent exposure to the tropical sun gave his face a masking lack of folds and planes – a measure of the anonymity ascribed to dark-skinned races by the Northern eye, which is more used to reading shadows on a light rather than a dark background.

“Your home security system leaves a lot to be desired, Sir Nigel. No one knows I’m here yet. I should have a word with Alex Cardinal about it.” Tarpigan lifted a hand holding one of Grantby’s cigars and extended a finger to scratch an itch in his dark hair, which was beginning to sprout healthily after close cropping. He was dressed conservatively in a sombre business jacket.

“I’m sure your entry has been recorded,” said Grantby.

"Which would do you a fat lot of good if I'd come here to kill you, Sir Nigel," Tarpigan pointed out, projecting all the confidence of a skilled salesman with a sinister dependability. "How's Alex doing?"

"He seems to be living up to your recommendation, judging from his work so far."

"He's got some very useful contacts. And he runs a fairly small-time operation. That means he can sneak about without being recognized."

"And what progress have you made?"

"Nothing useful from tracing back equipment. But we're building up a fair picture of the PSF's command structure. They're suckers for a good write-up in the alternative press. Alex and I have some useful contacts there. Most of them are as honest as short is long. And pricey, too."

"Action?" Grantby took note of the warning that the next round of expenses would be high.

"I've sorted out some likely candidates for accidents," grinned Tarpigan. "Mostly ones who could arrange for Lady Justice to look the other way if they end up in court. The police can mop up the small fry. With any luck, they'll resist arrest and get shot to pieces."

"What about whoever's behind the PSF?" Grantby was rather surprised to find that he could discuss the destruction of his enemies in a detached, passionless manner – an echo of Tarpigan's professional approach.

"All we've heard so far is something about two men in a van supplying them with equipment. I suppose Alex told you the same? Small fry, and not the same two men each time."

"I trust you'll be discreet about the accidents?"

"People in my line are used to being expendable." Tarpigan answered the real question. "We may be expensive, but we stay bought if there's the sort of trouble we can't fight, or buy, our way out of."

"Your next report should be very interesting, Major." Grantby found the confrontation with the truth a shade uncomfortable. "Good hunting."

"Good afternoon, Sir Nigel." Tarpigan's three-dimensional projection faded as he began to sketch a salute.

Grantby switched the videolink off, wondering whether there was any truth in the story that Tarpigan had never risen above lance-sergeant during his career in the Camerlish Royal Marines. The need to discuss home security with Alex Cardinal wiped away such unworthy speculation.

Alex Cardinal was enjoying the tan and panelled luxury of the Refuse Barons' club room. An account of one of Lady Tynsdale's adventures was holding most of his attention. At the back of his mind, he was wondering why an organization the size of Grantby Disposal & Reclamation Industries, which serviced eight million refuse producers, would choose to employ a firm which consisted of himself, his secretary and an office suite in an unfashionable area of Leviton.

The presence of Rufus Tarpigan on Grantby's payroll was both a clue and a warning that a serious element of risk was involved in the job. Cardinal was not afraid to withdraw from a case when the degree of danger reached an unacceptable level. Neither would he terminate a well-paid job just because there was a possibility that it might turn sour on him.

Sir Nigel Grantby was being charged at *Class Four* on a scale of charges that ran up to a wildly optimistic *Class Ten*. Most of Cardinal's jobs were charged at *Class Two* or *Three*. It was his policy not to worry about personal safety until the client had reached the upper half of his scale of charges.

08. Sovershend Returns to Leviton

A change of engine and wind noises shook Devrel Sovershend from his light doze. He rubbed sleep from his eyes as the turbine unwound and the transiter drifted gracefully across the expressway to an exit. The driver glanced at him with a touch of envy, remembering his own younger days. They were both above average height, both blond with restless blue eyes and both dressed in a jungle-green one-piece. The resemblance ended there.

Sovershend's hair dropped to a self-cut halt above his collar. The driver's coarsening curls were professionally arrayed to cover the maximum area. Fifteen more years lined his face. Three extra stones bulged his one-piece at belly, arm and thigh. Sovershend's garment was a cleaner, much looser and more comfortable fit, tapering into calf length travelling boots in soft, black leather, and belling slightly at the wrists to accommodate a sleeve needle gun.

Sovershend stretched vigorously, then milked a parting cup of synth-café from the apparently inexhaustible dispenser on the dashboard. Phoney frosts in the producing countries and bare-faced profiteering had converted real coffee into a luxury. He passed a cigarette, tax-paid at Norlish rates, to the driver then lit one for himself, half listening to the story of how the transiter had touched 125 mph on a couple of straight

stretches of expressway,

Even a graphic account of a multi-vehicle crash failed to arouse more than a passing interest. It was a proven fact that sensible people lose their sense of responsibility on an expressway.

The long journey from Norland with a shipment of uisge had drained Sovershend's energy reserves. He had seen enough crashes to last a couple of lifetimes. Too many friends and acquaintances had died on the roads to leave any over sympathy for strangers.

"You take your life into your hands every time you roll onto an expressway," added the driver. "You've got idiots on the road. And off it, with the snipers and bockan fishers."

"Fishers?" said Sovershend with a frown.

"Aye," nodded the driver with a strong Dunston accent. "They do it from bridges. But with high-speed contact glue, not a hook." He made a casting movement with his right hand. "They reckon it's just like playing a big game fish if they get one of the little electric cars."

Sovershend's laugh became a crashing yawn, confirming the driver's suspicion that he had been up all night. Cherished images of the driver's own youth flowed from his memory – birds and booze; pre-legal javon, which now contained a more socially acceptable psychotropic drug; parties from dusk to dawn and beyond; bodies sprawled all over the place, sleeping where they had lain down; a spectrum of reactions to the prospect and reality of breakfast; hangovers, never again and the smug superiority of those feeling no pain.

The driver never dreamt that Sovershend had spent the night burning up massive amounts of nervous energy while playing tag with the robber-baron agents of His Majesty's Customs and Excise. Sovershend looked much more like a party animal than a hardened criminal.

Sovershend's share of the load lay in safe storage in Hosp, a resort town on the Esham coast. The rest had been transferred by fishing boat to the Easton Security Products' depot on Shear Island. The firm's activities attracted very little unwelcome official attention in increasingly violent times. With branches all over Camerland and Norland, the firm was an ideal cover for a liquor distribution network.

"This do you?" said the driver as the transiter sighed to a half fifty yards up the road from the exit ramp.

"Fine, thanks." Sovershend slipped on a pair of sunglasses before climbing down into the glare of summer sunshine in the late afternoon.

The driver gave him a conspiratorial wink and patted the storage bin on his door. "See yer, maccar." His fee for the trip had been a bottle of uisge.

Engine whining busily up to operating speed, the transiter sighed away from the kerb to continue its journey. Sovershend swung his dark green canvas travelling bag onto his shoulder. Plastic travel packs on bottles clunked together. He crossed the road to the station and bought a ticket from a dejected blonde in an armour-glass cage. Three others were strung out along the suburban station's platform – two teenagers in brief, summer skirts and a porter with a knowing look.

After five minutes' hot, dusty lingering on a hard bench, Sovershend was glad to see the electric duorail train spring out of the forest. He settled himself on a vandal-proof seat and inspected the graffiti. Those within reading range were either unoriginal or obscure.

Three miles from the centre of Leviton, the train dived underground to complete its journey. Sovershend switched to the City Line to travel out from the centre as far as Walton Park. A jagged, black-edged hole in the wall opposite the up platform showed where one of the surveillance cameras had been mounted. Some people took exception to being spied on – even in the name of public safety and crowd control.

Park Avenue was solid lines of parked vehicles and slowly moving traffic. Walton Parade had been closed at the northern end. Fire-blackened shells of cars crouched at intervals like giant turtles sunning themselves. There were craters in the road surface, some two or more feet deep. Sovershend crossed to the shadowed, western side of the street, which was still open to pedestrians. His survival instinct warned him that one of the strollers past closed shops and offices had taken an interest in him.

A conveniently angled window gave him a glimpse of a large figure. The man was gaining on him at a menacing slink, his right hand clutching something which reflected the faded camouflage pattern on his baggy jacket.

A Robin with a knife, thought Sovershend.

He was being stalked by one of a growing band of daytime prowlers, who preyed on visitors to the capital. Sovershend's travelling bag was the Robin's target. In theory, a lightning double-swoop of the laser-sharp knife would sever the carrying strap and, perhaps, miss human flesh. Then the Robin would disappear down one of the side streets with all the speed of an athlete, possibly leaving the victim bleeding to death and too distressed to react.

Sovershend resisted the temptation to shake his right sleeve. The gesture would warn the pursuer that he was making sure that the sleeve would not interfere with his draw. A gusting breeze wafted toward him

a carrier bag decorated with the Norlish national flag. Someone had acquired and discarded a coronation souvenir. Sovershend took out his packet of Norlish cigarettes. He stepped casually into a doorway, out of the breeze, to light one.

When he cupped his hand, his needle gun flicked out of his sleeve to slap reassuringly into his right palm.

snap! Sovershend heard a flat sound.

Then the Robin fell past his doorway and hit the pavement with a wet slap.

Sovershend looked out into the street with an expression of appropriate surprise on a face with a weekend tan. He found himself looking at the crest on the riot helmet of a Civilian Security Police Auxiliary – a para-policeman from one of the private agencies, which were licensed to support the CSP in guarding enclosed premises and residential areas. The auxiliary asked for his identity card in a smooth voice.

Calming the shocked citizen, Sovershend thought.

He fished the official wafer of plastic from a pocket, taking care not to make anything resembling a threatening movement. Some auxiliaries erred on the side of trigger-happiness despite stringent regulations governing their conduct. As they were armed with Boulton riot guns, which can stun but not kill, they had some excuse for being safe rather than sorry. But they lived with the risk of the victim filing assault charges when he or she woke up. Such complications were a part of the price of a stand against armed criminals.

The auxiliary dropped Sovershend's identity card into the slot at the top of the relay on his black belt. Sovershend touched his right thumb to a white panel, which turned green to indicate a match with the information encoded on the card's data stripe.

A small crowd had gathered to mutter indignantly about the fate of the poor, thwarted thief and police brutality. The auxiliary shifted his stubby riot gun to a ready position, his young face hardening to a blank mask behind his visor. His flame-proof, dark green uniform added bulk to a figure below police standards.

Chop The Aux-Protos was a widespread slogan of the day, put about not only by criminals and their sympathizers but by self-appointed champions of freedom. Sovershend grinned mockingly at the most indignant member of the crowd, glad that the auxiliary's attention had been deflected. *Smugglers* was not one of the categories of persons permitted to carry weapons for defensive purposes.

Sovershend had obtained his permit by bribery. Although he was

confident that official inertia would make a challenge to an entry on the nation's computer record unlikely, he saw no point in pushing his luck with an unnecessary weapon authorization check.

"Need me any more?" he said

"The police will want a statement from you sometime." The auxiliary returned Sovershend's identity wafer. "This sobok will plead guilty, if he's got any sense, so you won't have to go to court."

"Saves messing about. You're new here, aren't you?"

The crowd moved away as a police siren approached. Sovershend slipped his saviour a couple of packets of imported cigarettes as a small bonus to top up the official bounty.

"Transferred to this beat at the beginning of the week," said the auxiliary, storing his tip in an unofficial pocket.

"What happened to the other bloke?"

"Broken leg," smirked the auxiliary. "Got in the way of a joy-rider."

The other bloke was not popular with his maccars.

The siren noise grew louder, approaching from the new police station at the end of Rodwell Road. Sovershend continued on to Strode Street, the evening hang-out of his client, who used the single name Martin. Sovershend turned the corner and walked on twenty yards to what had been a jeweller's shop. He touched a greasy spot on the lifting, dirty, dark green paint on a door frame. Then he stepped back half a pace to allow the snooper to take a good look at him.

An armoured flexi-door took the place of the display window. A loud crash behind the door told Sovershend that Martin was piloting his seventeen stones across his garage and workshop. The door slid up to reveal a figure who looked as if he had been bathing in oil, grease and three shades of blue paint. He had a smooth, padded face with a bulbous nose in the exact centre and large ears with pendulous lobes. The rest of his massive frame inflated a painter's overall.

Bits of motor car littered most of the floor area – far too many for all of them to belong to the skeleton of the hybrid car, which Martin was building in his spare time – unless he planned to give it three or four engines and about nine wheels. Sovershend perched on a clear area of the workbench after dusting it thoroughly. He looked in question at Martin, who just looked back.

"Aren't you going to say hello?" Sovershend remarked eventually. "You miserable sobok."

"Hello, you miserable sobok," obliged Martin. "Well?"

"Fine, thank you." Sovershend took a sample bottle from his travelling bag, peeled off a protective plastic shell and stripped away lead foil. His

client produced a pair of delicate liqueur glasses. Sovershend extracted a cork and filled the glasses. Martin sniffed suspiciously at the pale liquid before taking a healthy swallow.

"A full, slightly smoky, single malt," he decided. "I rather like this. Better than the last lot. Which way did you come?"

"More or less straight down the east coast."

"After all the trouble last month?"

"I got a whisper on that. The CustEx have been messing around in the east as a diversion. They're really waiting in the west for the dreaded Ambrose of Nottridge's next job."

"Well, I suppose you got through. Hear about Les Talbot?"

"No, I've been in Norland all week."

"She had a breakdown on the expressway, Started shooting at a Prot patrol when it stopped to look her over."

"Shooting?" gaped Sovershend. "Les?"

"It was on the news. A Traffic scout car with bullet splashes on its windscreen. Les dead when they shot back. And her transiter went up when they hit the load. Her driver got away – till some sobok mashed him while he was trying to get a lift. Your end of the business is getting dangerous."

"But shooting at the Prots? That doesn't sound like Les. She'd just pay her fine and carry on."

"They reckon her driver panicked. Even if they never found his rifle. Some sobok must have lifted it."

"Remind me to put my prices up," said Sovershend. "And talking of that, friend Perce in Hosp was making noises about putting his storage charges up."

"Oh?" said Martin, his sausage fingers poised over the videolink's keyboard. "How much does he want now?"

"I changed his mind for him," said Sovershend smugly.

"With something dead subtle, I suppose?"

"Nope. I made it something he'd understand. I used that line one of your lads came out with. That he got from the vid. About how Perce would have a job eating his dinner till they kitted him out with a new set of teeth."

"And he believed that, coming from you?" Martin frowned sceptically at Sovershend's reflection in the mirror of the videolink screen.

"No, coming from you, me old Martin."

With a sinister laugh of appreciation, Martin keyed a number but inhibited the visual circuit. The screen swirled from a mirror to green fog. Martin muttered a few words to his anonymous contact, then he

turned back to Sovershend. "I suppose you want paying? Fifty cases, wasn't it?"

"A hundred, and you know it."

Sovershend ground out his cigarette in the encrusted, paint tin lid which served as an ashtray and refilled the glasses. Martin dragged a toolkit box from a shelf under the workbench and dumped it beside Sovershend with a grunt of effort. He surrendered two dozen clear plastic envelopes, each containing a one-ounce gold wafer the shape of a business card. He added four red £100 notes, ten blue fives, and £6 in coins.

Sovershend loaded his payment into the travelling bag, his wallet and his money pocket. "Right," he remarked, "I'll get home now. If it's safe."

"You've seen Walton Parade?" said Martin. "The burnt-out cars? That was 'lensters scrapping with each other. Then the Prots, of course."

Teenage gangs of eulengangers, or 'lensters, took to the night-time streets in most cities and large towns to look for trouble. Although they generally held their territorial battles in clearance areas, they occasionally waged war in populated districts as a direct challenge to the police.

"Should be quiet for a few nights, then," said Sovershend.

"You can leave the bottle," hinted Martin.

"Swap you for a couple of bags of coffee?"

"Nothing for nothing, that's my boy." Martin retired to the store room behind his garage to fetch the two-pound bags of real coffee.

Walton Parade was peaceful again. When Sovershend reached the scene of the attempted robbery, both auxiliary and Robin had disappeared. All that remained was a small pool of blood – the result of a collision between an eyebrow and the unyielding pavement and an irresistible attraction for the eyes of passers by. Sovershend crossed over just past the skeleton of a car. He turned right at the bricked-up building on the corner then left into Carlock Alley.

The first four houses of a short terrace had been converted into three flats. Sovershend lived in flat two, which was mainly above ground. A rather fanciful mural of a polar landscape adorned the building's windowless façade, which was broken only by a satin-sheen steel door at the mid-point of the ground floor.

Sovershend touched a strip of wood-textured plastic below the bell push. A slight depression caused by a heavy hammer blow had made the sensor's response erratic. The same or a different hammerer had also attacked the armoured screen in front of the videolink camera. Sovershend moved his thumb and tried again. The steel door retreated, then

slid to the left. A thin, grating screech indicated that someone had been trying to break it down again.

Sovershend made a mental note to sound out the other occupants' views on a suitable active defence system. Several thousand Gals of electricity backed up by a hefty current, or half an ounce of lead in the right place, are excellent methods of teaching visitors not to knock with a battering ram.

The outer door of the entry porch closed behind him, leaving Sovershend in a seven-foot cube lined with a layer of silvery cushion plastic. He thumbed another touch-strip on the wall facing him, which lofted silently into the ceiling, revealing a cargo lift and an encircling staircase. Turning through two right-angles, the stairs took him up to the open-plan area which formed two-thirds of his flat.

The walls, ceilings and carpets in this upper area made up a continuous design of impossible-object projections. Vibrant greens and yellows, shaded with deepest black, slid into dynamic reds and violets as floor became walls. Shades of blue covered the ceiling.

The design was broken only by four large holowindows. Even the doors to the bedroom, bathroom, spare room, and kitchen had been painted to blend in. The profusion of planes and curves meeting where they had no business to touch made some visitors feel seasick. Sovershend felt that his private world was no crazier than the one outside.

He crossed to the bathroom, treading confidently on a carpet which seemed to heave and sink simultaneously. His clothes flew into a heap beside the home valet. After a shower, his priorities were fresh clothes, a videolink call to Katuishann to prove that he was still at liberty, food, and then some much-needed sleep.

09. A Briefing for the PSF

A drab room with drab furniture hovered between light and shadow as evening rain clouds gathered. Oscar Brooks tugged at his black moustache, then he decided to stop straining his eyes. A crack divided the white plastic case of the light switch. It clicked sluggishly, telling of a decaying mechanism and rotting wiring. The bulb was dim, suggesting imminent extinction. An annoying flicker tugged at his peripheral vision as Brooks gave his attention back to the map on the folding table. Two camping chairs were the only other furniture.

A faint, sliding click reached him from the hall. Brooks identified the sound as a key entering the lock on the front door. Then came a dry scrape of a brush draft-excluder across bare boards. Denton and

Murphy barged into his room, Murphy shoving Denton through the door from the hall, telling him that he was a rotten driver. His companion had a more than complete answer to all charges.

"Right, you two," said Brooks at a volume to rival that of his colleagues. "They'll hear you at Prot HQ."

Denton and Murphy mouthed ritual obscenities. The Popular Socialist Front was never popular with the police, and the feeling was mutual. Murphy had hated the police since his arrest for joy-riding at the age of eleven. He had been big for his age. A month-old parking fine was still a sore point with Denton.

"Let's get on," added Brooks. His colleagues were late and he was in a hurry to get home for his evening meal. The more time he spent with them, the less there would be for a pint of fortbeer on the way home.

All three gathered round the map on the table. A diagram of the Mirbank Refuse Reclamation Centre had been added to a large-scale map of the coastal city. Their decaying suburb lay in the bottom left corner of the map.

The object of the night's demonstration was to prove to Sir Miles Dunstan that his defences were paper-thin. Shielded by a fighting force of NeoKirlans, Denton, Murphy and two others were to blow a hole in the roof of the incinerator plant. They would then deliver ten canisters of dense, green smoke chemicals, along with a note advising the Refuse Barons to expect explosives next time.

"How many have you got?" said Brooks.

NeoKirlans were not the most reliable of troops. Frustrated, hopeless or just bored with their existence, they could reverse without warning a firm decision to end it all in an orgy of blood and destruction. In death, they played out a fantasy version of the thousand-year-old nightmare created by a warrior tribe from the region which had become modern Kraagen.

The original Kirlans had rampaged round the Inland Sea for a century – by horseback, on land and by sneaking up rivers in a sea-going fleet of shallow-draught boats. They had been hunted to extinction eventually by an unprecedented multi-national force created by an extraordinary series of truces agreed by their victims.

"I reckon we can count on a dozen bodies," said Denton. "Maybe a few more."

"What have you done with them?" said Brooks.

"Some in the Ultimatum Club, the rest at Molly's."

"As long as they're not having a free blast at our expense," said Brooks sourly. He tapped the map half a scale mile from the sea front.

"There's late shopping up and down this bit of Yord Street, so there will be plenty of people about till twenty or half-past. This place closes at half-sixteen on a Friday, though." He pointed to a green cross in the middle of a block. "Bert Shaw will have everything ready for you."

"What about the weather?" Denton eyed the darkness beyond the grimy window.

"The latest forecast is rain in the next hour, then cloudy but dry for the rest of the night," said Brooks. "The drinks in the assembly room have been doped with time-dilation drugs, so you won't have to worry about keeping the NeoKirlans quiet. Two hours will go like ten minutes. One final point – you two will carry the smoke bombs and the explosives. On no account are the NKs to be allowed near the explosives, clear?"

Denton and Murphy nodded automatically.

"The jammers for the centre's surveillance system have an independent power supply in case they cut the local supply. This green line is your recommended route across the roofs to the incinerator plant. Now, is there anything you want to ask me?" Brooks' tone was that of a man willing to help but with very little time to spare.

Denton and Murphy were torn briefly between uncertainty and a desire to seem efficient and all-knowing.

The competent image won. "Piece of piss," said Murphy as he scratched his chin. Several curly, black hairs fell from his beard. He blew them away from the map automatically, long accustomed to dealing with such minor annoyances.

"Good!" said Brooks. "Start things off as close to twenty-two hours as you can. What time do you make it now?"

The trio synchronized watches on 17:43:00.

"We've arranged a couple of diversions to give the Prots plenty to think about," Brooks concluded. "And one final point – some of our people work at this reclamation centre. So just smoke into the incinerator plant, right? No shooting the place up or anything like that. We don't want to put our maccars out of a job, do we?"

"That would be rotten," grinned Murphy.

"Right, I'll leave you to it." Brooks sketched a left-handed salute and headed for the door.

He had known Denton and Murphy for almost a year, and they had become regular drinking companions. Brooks left the house with feelings of mild regret. He believed that Denton and Murphy stood less than an even chance of escaping arrest. But the cause was more important than a few years in gaol. And his companions had seemed

confident enough behind a blend of excitement and the janglers.

With the detachment of someone whose liberty was not measured in hours, he saluted their probable sacrifice, then he turned his thoughts to the pleasant task of deciding where to stop for his pre-dinner drink.

"Get the beer out," said Denton in the abandoned house, intent on the map.

Murphy took two large cans from his shoulder bag. He shook one and set it on the table. Black stubble on Denton's cheerfully ugly face creased into a grin of anticipation. He was ready for a drink. Murphy moved over to the window to inspect the clouds. His can hissed open. Murphy took a long swallow, then he remarked, "Cheers, maccar!"

"Yeah, cheers," said Denton. He hauled back the ring on his can. A foaming tide gushed out, converting Dewsbury Street into a river and flooding the Refuse Reclamation Centre.

"You bockan sobok!" howled Denton.

Murphy laughed and ducked out of the way of a beer shower from his friend's hand. He dropped onto one of the camping chairs as Denton was blotting the map dry with a handkerchief.

"What's this say?" Murphy tapped a line of cramped script, frowning behind his dense beard.

"Looks like sol-something heat-something," said Denton.

"Right. That side of the roof faces south-east. It'll be where they test solar heating panels. We'll have to keep well clear of there. A couple of rounds of explosive shot and there'll be glass everywhere."

"Priyam!" agreed Denton. "Not that our NeoKirlans will be bothered about something as minor as that. Mad soboks."

"That's the one think I don't like. I've heard stories about these NKs. Some of them can go right off the edge."

"Which is why we'll be wearing tin helmets with nice, big plumes, just like them. And they're out to get themselves killed in a shooting match with the Prots, not each other. All we have to do is hang back, then let off the orange smoke for cover. As long as we keep our heads down, we'll be all right."

"Why not the big, green smoke bombs for that too?"

"Didn't you listen to Bert Shaw? The small ones don't have a delay fuse and they shove their smoke out faster. So we can get cover right where and when we need it."

"Just testing," protested Murphy. "We'll be able to get to the club for a game of twenty-ones after."

"That's all you ever think about," groaned Denton.

"Oh, I don't know." Murphy gave his friend a knowing leer.

"Want another can?"

Denton and Murphy hurled their empties to join some anonymous junk in a corner at the back of the room. Armed with fresh cans, they settled down to the task of planning the last details of the operation. The light in the room took on a more pronounced yellow tinge. Wind-driven liquid pellets hammered against the window as black clouds drifted westwards from the Inland Sea to put Mirbank's suburbs through the forecast street-wash.

10. Sovershend Meets Sandy

Devrel Sovershend aimed the controller at his holovision set, thumb on the *off* panel. A projection of the newsreader on *Twenty-One Update* shimmered into a mirror. The chirping, call noise made by the videolink ceased as Sovershend zapped it with the remote controller.

"Thought you might still be there," said Martin's voice. A large, red dot appeared in the middle of the screen to confirm that Martin had inhibited the visual circuit at his end of the line. "Someone wants words with you. Going anywhere near the Museum Club tonight?"

"I could," said Sovershend cautiously. "Why?"

"Because that's where he's going to be looking for you."

"Good sort of fellow, is he?" Sovershend put a coded question to establish the third party's line of business as well as his credentials. The importing business was a frail structure built on trust. Those involved in it were reluctant to deal with strangers.

"Serpently, he's all right." Martin confirmed that they were discussing a trustworthy fellow smuggler. "I've known him for a few months now. So you're interested?"

"No harm in listening. How do I find him?"

"He'll find you. I described your 'orrible self to him."

"Oh?" said Sovershend suspiciously. "What did you say?"

"About six foot, looks half starved, blond hair needing a comb and usually looks like he's been lynched by 'lensters because he goes to the Ten Thumb Tailor's . . ."

"I think I'll wear a name badge," interrupted Sovershend. "Right, I might just scand over there."

The red dot vanished. Sovershend found his car keys. His vehicle was garaged on the other side of the alley, behind a steel-shutter door. Light traffic allowed him to thread a rapid path eastwards. He ran into a solid jam just before Park Avenue became Grove Road at one corner of Walton Park.

Sovershend realized that he was stuck when a set of traffic lights turned green and his line of vehicles stayed put. The citizens' radio bands were alive with chatter but no one seemed to know what was happening.

A CSP Special Service patrol car raced past on the wrong side of the road. It turned right into Barongate Road, a broad artery, followed closely by three fire engines. A faint crackle in the distance could have been small-arms fire. Confused shouting on the radio blotted out information from those in a position to see anything.

Three more Special Service patrol cars zoomed past the line of stationary vehicles. The gold-on-dark-green unit markings identified them as belonging to Five Troop, which was based at the new police station at Rodwell Road. A hammering of concussive grenades ended the gun battle.

The traffic began to crawl forward almost immediately, directed by two troopers in full riot gear. Sovershend took a full minute to cross the four lanes of Barongate Road. He saw a burnt-out van about fifty yards down on the right. It straddled the central white line, pointing toward a merry blaze, which lit an area with wrecked street lights.

Flames billowed from the shattered windows of a tall building. Solid pillars of smoke supported the clouded, darkening sky. Bright yellow-clad figures trailed white hoses into the fire. Special Service Troopers were pushing dazed prisoners into line to be searched, back-lit by the blaze. Two ambulance crews were busy beside still figures. Bright flashes seared the ground-hugging smoke haze as press and police photographers captured the scene. A mob of spectators was gathering, eager for diversion. Then brick walls sliced away the spectacle.

Sovershend made a right turn, heading for a car stack on the former site of the National Museum. He spiralled up to the thirteenth level. Ignoring the *Level Full* sign, he drove down the aisle to the end. A left turn took him into open space. He pressed his membership disc to sensor hidden behind the loop of the first *e* in *Level 13*. After a delay of several seconds, part of the wall retreated and slid to the right. Sovershend stepped into the Museum Club's entry porch. A steel door smashed shut behind him.

The club extended over three levels at the heart of a sixteen-storey car stack. There were no signs to bring in passing trade and it was never mentioned in the *clubs 'n' pubs* section of the capital city's entertainments guide. Its existence remained an open secret among its members, current and former staff and thousands of guests. The Museum Club was founded on the sound principle that people love to

be part of a select group.

An inner door opened when the weapons snooper was satisfied that Sovershend was unarmed. He had left his sleeve needler in his car. If there was any trouble at the club, the management preferred to avoid shooting trouble. About two dozen people were spread around the main room when Sovershend made his entrance. A diffuse rumble of voices told him that something was happening on one of the other levels.

The man behind the long bar knew Sovershend by sight. Setting aside the day's racing results, he kicked his wheeled chair up the bar, taking an ornate pint mug from a shelf in passing.

"Cheers, Willy!" Sovershend exchanged three oval coins for a pint of fortified light without expecting change. "Any idea what's happening on Barongate Road?"

Willy shrugged. "Just 'lensters scrapping over territory. One lot trapped some others in that half-demolished hospital then set fire to it. Maybe the rest's fell down by now."

"Saved the taxpayer a few bob by knocking it down for free?" grinned Sovershend.

"They do say there's good in everyone, even 'lensters," laughed the barman.

Sovershend drifted away to a table opposite the entrance, scanning for familiar faces but failing to find any. A group of casually dressed musicians was checking equipment on the corner stage. One of the guitarists and the drummer were plucking and tapping through a selection of long-dead 'classics', hurrying from one to the next as if trying to trap the other on unfamiliar ground.

Sovershend slid onto a bench seat which was upholstered in something soft and red, like the club's lighting. Sprawled comfortably, he lit a Norlish cigarette and wondered when Martin's contact would put in an appearance.

The room filled up slowly with people and noise. Sovershend's mug was almost empty. Then a smoked plastic mug landed on the table beside his Heitainan crystal. Sovershend glanced up. At first, the newcomer seemed to be a fashionably dressed thirty-year-old. A closer inspection revealed that the man was about fifty and he had been reading too many fashion magazines. Everything that he was wearing was season-new.

Another old soul trying to recapture a lost youth, thought Sovershend. *What the fervoek's he been reading? Looks like Contemporary Spectrum's pastels and one of the chunky, masculine pendants they were*

advertising in Now Time. Sovershend had glanced through these glossy magazines in his dentist's waiting room.

The fashion-plate managed to catch a roving waiter's eye and waved him over with a gesture intended to combine casual elegance with authority. Then he looked at Sovershend – and started reflexively when he made unexpected eye contact.

"Do we have a mutual friend?" Sovershend maintained an interrogative stare.

"Martin sent me. I'm Sandy," said the stranger. "Two pints of light," he added to the hovering waiter. He had a newsreader's accent and precision of delivery.

Sovershend pegged Sandy as a spirits drinker, probably marivodka, slumming with the peasants. Sandy seemed interested more in the light show tests than in getting down to business. Then the drinks arrived. The waiter received a blue note and a frigid smile. Sandy dismissed the change with another elegant wave of his hand, most of his attention on the patterns being woven by lasers on a multi-coloured smoke cloud above the stage.

The waiter gave Sandy a look of utter contempt, which was wasted, then shook his head at Sovershend. Sovershend shrugged, disclaiming all responsibility for someone so obviously out of place. He topped up his personal mug from a fresh mug. He disliked drinking out of plastic.

At last, Sandy leaned across the table to whisper, "I can use your contacts in Dungard." The general noise level in the room almost drowned his conspiratorial mutter.

Sovershend took a cigarette-packet-size, yellow and black-striped box from a pocket. He set it on end on the table beside the ashtray. "This is a combined hush screen and jambler," he explained as an unnerving unnoise surrounded them. His words seemed muffled, half swallowed at the edges. "What's the deal?"

"We're trying something new in the importing line," said Sandy. "We need to plug in to the Dungard distributors. And a contact who doesn't mind travelling." He failed to mention that he was a member of the Duke of Atmain's security staff, just as Charles Demirell had not mentioned that Sovershend would be out of business after the job.

"Sounds interesting." Sovershend remained cautious. Sandy seemed an unlikely leader of a gang of smugglers. "When does all this come off?"

"In four days' time." Sandy slipped an envelope round the table. "Here's everything you need to know. Martin ciphered it for your protection."

Sovershend whistled softly. "Svey yoget! You must be well in with the old sobok."

"We've done a lot of business recently," nodded Sandy. "And he says we can trust you."

Sovershend tucked the envelope into an inside pocket. "I hope you know the CustEx are planning to jump on a big load coming in from Belldon around the middle of next week?"

"They'll be looking in the wrong direction when we arrive from Norland," smiled Sandy.

"As long as you're not planning to arrive too far south. Have you put details of the size of the job in this?" Sovershend tapped the pocket containing the envelope.

"I don't think so," said Sandy vaguely.

"Yoge' vars!" groaned Sovershend, doubts beginning to multiply. "We all have to know that. The distributors will want to know if it's worth their while."

"Martin always takes everything we bring."

"You're taking a big step up from Martin to this lot. The Dungard mob get rid of the stuff almost before it's unloaded. They'll need to know how many buyers to invite to the sale. And my introduction will cost you five per cent of the value of the job. I want to know if it's worth *my* while."

"Oh! Well, I can tell you the total weight of the shipment," Sandy offered.

"I have to know the number of cases. A large number, too."

Sandy shrugged. "The whole object of this run is to establish the method and secure the contacts. You have a number. Vid me there tomorrow at thirteen to let me know what you think of the route. I'll find out the quantity." Sandy drained his mug with a flourish, and tried to rise to his feet in a smooth, flowing movement. He spoiled the elegant effect by catching his foot on one of the table legs.

The noise of the club surged in with overwhelming force when Sovershend switched off the hush screen. Sandy gave a reflex shudder as he crossed the dividing line between insulated privacy and public uproar. Leaving behind two empty beer mugs and a filling dent in the upholstery, Jules Sandford lounged toward the exit. He had a report to make. Charles Demirell, the Duke of Atmain's principal agent in Camerland, would be pleased to hear that Sovershend was firmly hooked.

Sovershend remained at the club until twenty-three hours. He ordered an anti-alc when the band disappeared off stage for a quick drink

before their encore. Resisting invitations from a group of friends to make a night of it, Sovershend waited the recommended five minutes for the cocktail of enzymes and chemical mops to blot most of the alcohol from his system. Then he reclaimed his car.

When he left the car stack, the wind was blowing from the north-west, carrying lumpy clouds across the sky and distributing a smell of burning. Sovershend turned onto Barongate Road for a quick nose. All but one of the fire engines had returned to the station on Carton Row. No more than a token scattering of police remained to stop souvenir hunters wandering into the soggy, evil-smelling ruins.

The last fire engine moved away from the kerb as Sovershend reached the scene of the fire. Deciding that there was nothing to see, he tagged on behind it. Their route to the fire station would take him almost to his doorstep.

Lights flashing but siren stilled, the firemen raced back for a late snack and the traditional call-out half of fortbeer, which was known as a smoke-cutter in the trade. Since the introduction of this perk, it was often said that firemen made their best times on the way back from a call. Glancing down at a speedometer hovering at the 50 mark, Sovershend decided that it must be true.

Back at his town castle – the estate agent’s description – he poured himself a generous slug of Norland-bottled, Belldon brandy and switched on the cube player. A piece by Egremont began to whisper and rustle all around him, melting from sixteen speakers of various sizes. He crossed to the opposite side of the room. Armed with a wipe-pad and stylus taken from the sideboard, he skated a lounge to within an easy stretch of the drinks cupboard and settled down to translate the contents of Sandy’s envelope.

“Svey yoget!” he remarked aloud and with respect after rechecking the decoded message. “If Sandy thought this one up, he’s a brilliant actor.”

Sandy’s plan was to transport his shipment down the west coast, up the River Capse and then along the ship canal to Dungard. He required an unloading and distribution point with easy access to an expressway. The methods of transport were not specified, but the timetable for the final stages of the run indicated high speed travel.

Sovershend rolled over to the videolink. He tapped at the keyboard to call up a detailed map of the Dungard area. After considering it for several thoughtful minutes, he switched to the communications mode and keyed Martin’s number.

“He’s not here,” said a deep voice from a green-tinted screen. “And I

don't know when he'll be back."

Sovershend ignored the denial. "Well, what about him?"

"Not what you expected?" Martin switched on his visual circuit to display the enormous grin draped across his wide face.

"Bockan right!" agreed Sovershend. "He's about your age, but he pretends he's mine. He hasn't got a clue about quantities. But this scheme looks positively brilliant. Who else is he working with?"

"Never seen them. He's the front man. I deal with him. But I've had no problems at all."

"But he's so bockan vague about important details."

"That's him all over," chuckled Martin. "But he must have a good team behind him. You worry too much. Can I get back to my car now?"

"Are you going to put a blob of paint on your other cheek to balance things up?" Sovershend asked with exaggerated interest.

Martin rippled his lips in a snarl as he broke the link.

Somewhat encouraged, Sovershend made a guarded vid call to a Dungard number. By a stroke of luck, the senior partner of the distribution firm was lurking in that particular pub. He agreed to a meeting on the following Monday.

Swamped by sudden tiredness, Sovershend finished his drink and retired to bed. It had been a successful day, and he had the pleasing prospect of an overpaid job in the offing.

11. The PSF Raid a Refuse Reclamation Centre

The glow-crystal watch on Murphy's right wrist was showing 21:53. He was heartily sick of NeoKirlans. The smug anticipation of fourteen examples of the cult had worn his nerves tissue-paper thin. Less than ten minutes had passed since their strike force had been given the antidote to the time-expansion drug. How anyone could be so cheerful minutes away from a violent death defeated Murphy.

The strained smiles on the faces of Denton and the other two members of the PSF Action Cell told him that he was not alone in his revulsion and incomprehension. Only the certain knowledge that the mission was right and necessary kept him in the cramped, basement stockroom in the carpet warehouse.

When he and his companions attacked the Mirbank Refuse Reclamation Centre, which lay eight feet from the side wall of the warehouse, on the other side of a narrow alley, Old Dunstan would be forced to rethink his security arrangements. And the more money he and his fellow Refuse Barons spent, the more jobs would be created for clever

but unemployed people like Murphy and his companions.

Denton emitted a piercing whistle to bring silence to the stockroom, scattering Murphy's thoughts. "Right, let's go," called the leader of the cell,

Murphy opened the door and headed for the stairs, grateful to escape from the sickly sweet, cloying, rancid combination of spilt drink, sweat, stale vomit and smoke of various descriptions in the assembly room. He lit a lifter, an ultramild-strength javo, to settle a nervous flutter in his digestive tract. A purposeful clatter followed him up the bare, wooden steps, punctuated by cackles of suppressed glee.

Denton tugged absently at the straps which held a pack of smoke bombs to his left hip. Tension wound tighter as the assault force checked its weapons and prepared for a mad charge to oblivion.

"Come on, let's get *on* with it," urged Murphy.

Denton twisted the handle of an exploder. Steel-barred windows leapt from their frames to crash into the alley between the warehouse and the reclamation centre. Willing hands heaved ladder bridges across to the roof of Storage Area 2.

"Kirlan! Kirlan! Kirlaan!"

The battle cry of the NeoKirlans tore from every throat as plume-crested warriors hurled themselves across the bridges. Lights flared into brief life. Bursts of automatic fire extinguished them immediately. Shrouded in orange smoke fog, the PSF Action Cell made its way over Packing Area 2, over Sorting Area 3, onto the roofs of Sorting Area 1 and the Line Generator Plant, and finally to the Incinerator Plant.

After brief skirmishes at the roof access hatches, the centre's security staff retired behind steel doors to await the arrival of the police. They were prepared to repel thieves and vandals, but NeoKirlans were another story. Encouraging sirens could be heard already, approaching at high speed.

Hugging the rough, gravel surface of the flat roof, the PSF cell stripped away red wrappers. They set shaped charges in a rough circle as their cover force of NeoKirlans poured a concentrated fire into the receiving and transport yards, and the buildings opposite the reclamation centre.

A violent shudder bounced gravel into the air. Light streamed from a hole in the roof of the incinerator plant, pushing a searchlight beam through the orange smoke haze. Shouts of triumph became screams of agony as a burst of explosive shot ripped through a wind-gusted channel in the smoke. The Code of Kirlan was death and bringing death. A dying NeoKirlan had emptied his magazine at the only visible

target – the PSF cell. Then he rolled from the roof of the line generator plant, taking a last dive to the stained concrete of the transport yard.

Shocked by the deaths of his two friends, Murphy tried to save himself. Sprinting through the thinning smoke-haze, he made the roof of Packing Area 2. Then a police marksman put three rounds through his chest from a glassless, frameless, warehouse window. Left alone, Denton stripped off green wrappers and activated fuses. The lights in the incinerator plant had been extinguished but he could work by touch and a diffuse, angry glow from the transport yard, where a van was burning. Sitting at the jagged edge of the hole in the concrete roof, his feet dangling into space, he dropped what he thought were green smoke bombs into the refuse reclamation centre's incinerator plant.

He had two smoke bombs left. A round of explosive shot bit a great chunk out of his left arm, throwing him onto his back, out of the line of fire. Shocked numbness spread from the bone-deep crater, pushing away pain but not the heat of a rush of blood. A wave of fire swallowed him. Denton's last thought was one of wonder. He was flying!

12. Mortlake & Pinder with the NTF

A sky full of stars and their own headlights provided the only illumination on the stretch of rural expressway when Gary Mortlake and Neil Pinder had left the service complex behind. Their destination was a ruined and abandoned village called Akgard. It lay two miles ahead, buried in a mass of woodland which resembled an inverted boot on their large-scale map of Neal county. They were over 200 miles south of their meeting point with the PSF the previous afternoon.

"Bockan waste of time, this trip," Pinder thought for the umpteenth time.

"What?" grunted Mortlake from the passenger seat of their blue *Rutland Explorer* van.

Pinder realized that he had been thinking aloud. "This," he growled. "Getting the National yogan Temperance Front into the act. If we want to stop this Ambrose of Nottridge landing smuggle on the coast around here, what's wrong with an anonymous vid call to the CustEx?"

"Vr. Demirell, our peerless leader, doesn't approve of the NTF," explained Mortlake patiently. "Not their opposition to the demon drink, or their idea that smoking javon is an acceptable substitute."

"I know," said Pinder with equal patience. "But I still think it's a liberty, Charlie using the Duke's protection racket to work off his own personal prejudices."

"Charlie, is it?" laughed Mortlake. "Bet you wouldn't dare call him that to his face. Which is the big advantage of being the field commander. No one tells you what to do. As long as the Duke thinks the sun shines out his porthole, he'll get away with anything." He leaned forward until his ample nose reached the windscreen. "We should be near the turn-off now."

Tall, straight trees raised walls of blackness on either side of the expressway. Pinder slackened their speed as a faint luminosity signalled the presence of white marker stones at a break in the central reservation. A sign demanding that no turns be made at this convenient spot flashed into brilliant light as the van arced toward it. Pinder ignored the order. It was very late, both carriageways were clear and the area was not one favoured by lurking police patrols.

The van crossed the hard shoulder of the westbound carriage-way and lurched over a flattened, roadside fence of railway sleepers. Although made redundant by concrete over a dozen years earlier, the preservatives had kept them solid enough to jolt the van up and down.

An uneven track, seasoned liberally with potholes where undermined tarmac had slumped, twisted toward a sizeable clearing in the southern wood. According to the map, the estuary of the River Barton and Shear Island lay five miles due north of the van's position.

Headlights splashed tumble-down buildings, pavements turned to rockeries by up-thrusting grass and weeds, and then a car. Most of the vehicle was a brownish-yellow *Deforest*, to which had been grafted the front end of a maroon and rust *Panther*. Pinder braked to a smooth stop. A torch flashed toward the van, sliding a strong, white beam across the dusty, mid-blue bonnet three times. Mortlake counted to ten in muttered Belldan. The torch flashed twice more. After another count of ten, Pinder turned the van's light on and off four times.

"All right, enough of playing bockan spies," said Mortlake. "Let's go and natter with a bunch of nuts."

Pinder switched the engine off. A howl from somewhere not too distant made the hairs on the back of his neck stand to attention. "Dog pack!" he muttered, sliding a Noiseless from his shoulder holster to check that the clip was full.

"What d'you expect?" said Mortlake casually. He slipped a spare magazine for his machine pistol into each of the side pockets of his coveret, then looped the carrying sling of his weapon over his left shoulder. "Make sure you don't point that thing at our friends. They might just get the wrong impression."

"I know what I'm doing," snarled Pinder as he holstered the Noiseless.

He was strictly a townie. Expeditions into the countryside made him nervous, especially at night. The hours of darkness, he believed, were ideally spent within the shelter of the solid walls of the Duke of Atmain's castle. It was only his inability to make as much money any other way that made him expose his precious life to nocturnal dangers from unknown directions.

"Don't forget to smile." Mortlake opened his door and stepped out into the dancing beam of the torch held by the approaching dark shape.

"Welcome. My name is Dudley. Did you have much trouble finding us?" Their National Temperance Front contact turned out to be a man with a young voice which was screened through by a mass of facial hair. His large, round spectacles caught reflections from scratches on the van's windscreen.

"No, no problems," said Mortlake cheerfully. "I'm Marshall. This is Parker."

"Pleased to meet you." Dudley nodded to Pinder. "Let's go and join the others. Watch where you're treading. The dogs, you know." He led the visitors along a street of gaping, glassless windows.

"Do you have much trouble from dogs?" said Pinder nervously, planting his feet only in areas swept by his torch.

"More than average, I suppose, living out here." Dudley replied over his shoulder. "We've tried various repellents, but the ones that work best are either too expensive or toxic, or they're people-repellents too. We have a purge every so often. When we go out and shoot every dog we can find. But they always come back."

"What's around here to attract them?" said Pinder. "I'd have thought they'd get the message and go somewhere safer."

"It's the rabbits," said Dudley. "The little soboks can't resist a nibble at our crop, and the dogs can catch them easily when their tiny brains are in outer space."

"Rabbits eat your stone-plants?" said Mortlake incredulously. "Now I've heard everything."

"I got a shock myself when I saw them doing it," said Dudley. "And it was a bit of a relief, too. We thought we had an exotic form of leaf-rot. Mind the step up." He clicked a latch and opened the door to the solid green twilight of two yards of hall.

Dudley made sure that the outer door was closed before pulling aside the light-trap blanket. The room was bright and clean. Every surface had been painted white – including the simple furniture and the sheets of hardboard over the windows. The whole room, apart from the grey-cast floor of painted boards, glowed with a living luminosity.

A man and a woman were waiting for the visitors, sitting in armchairs made of white-painted, quadruple-ply cardboard and upholstered in some bulky, white, furry material, which made Mortlake think of rabbit tails. Both Lawsonites in the house were wearing knee-length, frost-blue shorts and a plain cotton shirt. Dudley's night outfit was hole-black shorts and an ancient flame shirt, which could manage only the occasional swirl of dark green iridescence despite the almost painful light level.

"Sutton and Larne." Dudley indicated the man and the woman in that order. "Our visitors are Parker and Marshall."

As he shook their hands, Mortlake tried to decide whether the NTF representatives were disguised. Sutton was clean-shaven above his eyebrows, but he sported a monstrous, bushy beard in fiery ginger. He was big, well above average height, with an impressive physique to bulge his light, summer evening garments.

Larne, in contrast, was small and lightly built. Long, black hair, an impressive suntan and bizarre make-up made forming an accurate picture of her features virtually impossible. Dudley also had a bushy beard, his oversize glasses and long, black hair hanging straight down.

The visitors were fairly anonymous in their dark coverlets and trousers. Mortlake sported a blond froth of moustache to draw some attention from his distinctive nose. Pinder's eye-attractant was a bad case of plastic acne at his jawline.

"Shall we get started?" said Dudley in a business-like tone. The midnight film on holovision started in three-quarters of an hour. He wanted everything out of the way by then.

All five pulled cardboard chairs up to a white, cardboard table. A volcanic glass ashtray formed the centrepiece. Mortlake and Pinder sat cautiously, discovering that the padded cardboard could be surprisingly comfortable and secure.

"Would you like to try some of our local product?" Sutton half-rose from his chair in anticipation. His deep and powerful voice sounded as if it had been trained for the professional stage.

"Sure, why not," nodded Mortlake.

Sutton lofted endlessly to his full height and found a white cupboard on the white window wall. Given the brilliant, shadowless lighting, Mortlake decided that it was a major achievement.

"These are just lifters." Sutton popped the plastic lid off a one-pound synth-café tin to reveal tightly packed, yellow peaks of cigarette paper.

"Could I have something to drink, please?" Pinder said as he helped himself to a javo. "These things always dry my throat out. It's a bit of a

gasper out, tonight.”

“Promising a long summer,” said Larne optimistically.

She disappeared through an almost invisible door. Dudley offered his lighter. The smell of aromatic, herbal tobacco and burning haystacks filled the air. A rattling of ice-cubes heralded Lame’s return with a frosting jug of home-made lemonade and a stack of plastic beakers.

“Right, what have you got for us?” said Dudley briskly.

Mortlake unfolded part of a map of Neal county. The Duke of Atmain’s men were posing as sympathizers rather than active members of the National Temperance Front.

“As far as we can tell, it’s not Ambrose Mellbury making this run, it’s Bekker, his second in command.” Mortlake tapped a pencil cross on the coast, about twenty-five miles to the east of the ruins of Axcgard. The landing site was a promontory some fifteen miles below the Barton estuary, very close to two villages which operated coastal fishing vessels. “Our information is he’ll be landing here about two in the morning on Wednesday the twenty-fourth.”

“We heard Thursday,” remarked Sutton. “And further south, towards the other arm of the bay.”

“Very probably,” said Mortlake. “They always spread plenty of rumours to confuse the issue. There’s going to be five motor launches all together. That’s from someone actually inside Mellbury’s organization.”

“How many men all together?” said Lame, impressed by the quality of the Intelligence information.

“Four men to a crew. And eight to ten on shore at any given time. The pick-up lorries are on a staggered schedule. You’ll have to watch that when you get going. We don’t want anything to get away, do we?”

“Right,” agreed Sutton, nodding his tanned dome.

“It’ll be a real pleasure, hitting that sobok Mellbury.” Larne contorted her bizarre make-up into a malevolent smile.

Ambrose Mellbury of Nottridge was well liked by most of his associates, his wife Lillith included, but his extrovert nature and the sheer delight that he took in smuggling dutiable goods past agents of His Camerlish Majesty’s Customs and Excise infuriated rivals and opponents alike. Although many people spent sleepless nights trying to think of ways to do him down, Ambrose also had an infuriating knack of remaining one step ahead of trouble. But with solid inside information, the National Temperance Front was hoping for success for once.

“We’ve marked the routes the lorries will be taking to approach and leave the landing area,” continued Mortlake. “And there’s a timetable on

the back. It should be pretty accurate. I hope you can do the rest."

"Oh, yes," nodded Dudley confidently. "They won't get away with it this time."

"Good!" said Mortlake cheerfully, flicking ash into the gleaming, black ashtray. "You're going to make a lot of people very happy when you stomp on Ambrose's number two."

"Pity it's not the man himself," said Larnie. "You know, we would have come to where you are for information as good as this."

"That's all right," smiled Mortlake. "We had to be in the area anyway."

He and Pinder had just dropped off a supply of small sabotage charges for the local branch of the Popular Socialist Front.

Pinder glanced at his watch. "We'd better get moving. It's gone half twenty-three."

"I feel we owe you something," insisted Dudley.

"Oh, forget it," said Mortlake modestly. "A good job by you on Wednesday is reward enough."

"How about something for later on?" Sutton produced another synth-café tin from the supply cupboard. "These are quite a bit stronger than the lifters."

"Thanks very much," said Pinder before Mortlake could open his mouth. With the tin stuffed into the side pocket of his midnight blue coveret, he looked as if he had an enormous growth on his hip.

The night was soft starlight struggling against monstrous green and deep blue after-images when Mortlake and Pinder left the house with Dudley. Following pools of torchlight, they made for their van. The isolation conveyed by the sheltering, surrounding woodland made the crumbling village seem even more unnaturally quiet. Even the footsteps on broken pavements sounded oddly muted in the warm, still air.

"Nice night," remarked Mortlake.

"They say it's going to be a scorcher of a summer when it gets going," said Dudley. "We're well into that sort of a weather pattern, going from past experience."

"What's that?" whispered Pinder urgently, his ears straining to locate an ominous slither.

"What's what?" said Mortlake with total unconcern.

Before Pinder could reply, a silver-grey streak flew from the empty blackness of a window – straight at him. He fell on his left side and his holster, yelling in terror, a bristling hound snapping at his throat. Snarling battle cries, dogs of all sizes and breeds massed into the torch beams, eyes glowing, teeth bared. Mortlake took a chance with Pinder's life to fire a three-round burst. The dog rolled away, screaming and

dragging a broken leg. Attracted by the smell of hot blood, several of the pack swung to attack it.

Pinder crawled to join Mortlake and Dudley. Backs to a solid wall, they were kicking and firing at the enraged horde. Nerve-shattering shrieks filled their ears, drowning their shots. Then an angry hammering began behind the beleaguered trio.

Red tracers squirted from the heavy machine gun mounted at an upper window of the NTF's communal house. Twin searchlights flooded the street with hard brilliance. Blood-smeared survivors of the canine assault force retreated into the night. The machine gun continued to slash at the remaining dogs, finishing off the wounded.

Slumped in a sitting position against the wall of a ruined house, Neil Pinder realized that he was pulling the trigger of an empty pistol. When he tried to reload, he found that he had fired off both spare magazines.

"Fervoek!" he gasped, his mouth desert-dry, heart pounding a hole in his chest. "I think I need a . . ."

Mortlake nudged him with a warning foot before he could mention drink in the presence of members of the NTF.

"A laundry that's not too fussy," Pinder finished, almost without a pause.

"I'm with you there," said Dudley in a strained voice. "Everyone all right?"

"Just about." Mortlake put a round through the head of a huge dog, which may or may not have moved.

"Still alive down there?" boomed Sutton's voice from first-floor level.

"Somehow," called Dudley. "Good shooting."

"We aim to please," laughed Sutton.

Dudley released a piteous groan. "If the dogs don't get you, his rotten jokes will."

"We'd better get moving," said Mortlake. "Before they come back with some friends."

"I think another purge is overdue," nodded Dudley. "Are your rabies shots up to date?"

"Yogast, I hope so!" muttered Pinder.

"Drive carefully," added Dudley.

Mortlake and Pinder picked their way over the carcasses, trying not to step into the sticky ocean between them. In the bouncing torchlight, it was hard to believe that the dogs were not sleeping, ready to wake and tear them to pieces at any moment. Mortlake took the wheel of the van. He waved a salute to the National Temperance Front commune, then he reversed and rolled down the track to the expressway.

No other vehicles were visible in either direction. The van lurched across the fallen sleeper-fence, and crossed to the eastbound carriageway. Mortlake was safely up to a respectable speed before a Traffic patrol vehicle came into view. The yellow-striped, *Short* scout car stormed past on the opposite carriageway and disappeared into a corner.

Neil Pinder pulled a bottle from the dashboard locker with a surprisingly steady hand and took a good drink. "Yogar! I needed that!" he gasped.

"Sure our friends can't see us?" mocked Mortlake, holding out a hand for the bottle.

"Yog' them," scoffed Pinder. "But those ganar dogs! And to think, people keep the soboks as pets."

"Ah, yes," Mortlake returned the bottle. "But they've got a veneer of civilization. Not like country dogs."

"You don't have to tell me that!" Pinder took another swig from the bottle. "I'll never go near a dog again without some body armour. They're bockan strong, you know."

"Don't forget the danger money."

"No one told me the danger would be so dangerous." Pinder offered the bottle again. Mortlake refused it with a shake of his head. Pinder put the bottle away again. "Still, we got a whole stak of home-grown javon out of it."

"Priyam!" agreed Mortlake. "You know, they're quite human for a bunch of yadren. You think they're going to be fanatics about the whole ecology and healthy living movement."

"I was surprised to hear them talking about shooting dogs like vermin. Until we found out their survival depends on it."

"Me, too. Where they go wrong is their name. When you say National Temperance Front, it's the *Front* that sticks in your mind. And that means trouble to most people. Like the Popular Socialist *Front*. If you don't agree with those soboks, you're liable to get shot, blown up, or if you're very lucky, just beaten to a pulp. All the NTF do is hold you down, pour your booze away and stick a javo in your gob."

"The NTF are just as bad in their own way," said Pinder. "No matter what their medical evidence shows, swapping booze for the noble stone-plant is cutting down choices."

"Still, as long as they jump all over Ambrose's maccar in the name of temperance, Charlie will be happy. And our revered lord and master, the Duke."

"Ganar sobok," muttered Pinder. "I bet Charlie's never had to fight for

his life against a million starving dogs.”

“Not unless some woman’s husband set the dogs on him.”

Mortlake enjoyed the thought as the outskirts of Berrich began to drift past. Another CSP patrol car screamed past them in an impressive display of flashing lights and wailing siren. Mortlake wondered idly whether someone had reported all the shooting at the commune. Sound travels surprising distances on a still night.

“Next right, and it’s on the left,” said Pinder.

“Right, got it,” nodded Mortlake.

He slowed down and made the turn, attracting a stare from a pair of CSP Auxiliaries, who were lurking in a doorway, enjoying a quiet smoke. The van bumped across the pavement and through an archway into a small courtyard. Mortlake parked in a gap between two cars. He locked the van, then followed Pinder to the steel door in the opposite corner of the courtyard.

Illumination just stronger than summer twilight faded as they entered the building. The dim light was designed to allow visitors to move around the courtyard without bumping into anything, yet not attract the attention of passers-by in the street. Uncarpeted wooden stairs led up to another steel door. Mortlake and Pinder stepped into a normal room. The only item painted white was the window frame, which was hidden by orange curtains.

“How did it go?” called a female voice, speaking Ferran with a faint Belldan accent.

“We nearly got eaten by bockan dogs,” complained Pinder, throwing his blood-stained coverlet at one of the dining chairs. “Any food going?” Danger always left him feeling ravenous as an assurance that he was still alive.

Louise Liston pushed backwards through the swing door from the kitchen and turned to reveal a well-stocked cheese board and a coffee pot.

“Some poodle look at you, Neil?” she scoffed. When she had deposited her load on the table, she looked patiently at Pinder. Her eyes widened in horror when she spotted the dark splashes on his shirt. “Are you hurt? Neil? Gary?”

“We’re bloody but unharmed,” Mortlake assured her. “You should have seen the dogs, though.”

Pinder gave a hollow laugh as he retired to his room in search of clean clothes. Mortlake investigated the dishes on the table, then the coffee pot. “Real coffee, eh? Things are looking up.”

“A small celebration in anticipation,” said Liston. “So it’s all set now?”

"The NTF will jump all over Bekker like performing dogs. Bad choice of words, that. Tell you who I feel sorry for, though. That kerel Sandy's got working for him. Sovershend. He's going to get the blame for setting Bekker up."

"How can you feel sorry for someone you don't know?" Pinder called from his room. "He might be a proper sobok. He might deserve everything that's coming to him."

"You're not exactly overflowing with love for your fellow creatures, are you, Neil?" laughed Liston. "Come here and let me get rid of that revolting mess on your face."

Pinder, in a dressing gown, allowed her to strip plastic acne from his chin on the way to the bathroom.

"Demirell promised us a bonus when this operation's over, Liston added.

She reminded Mortlake of a bullet. It was a combination of her dark grey hair, dumpy figure and the long, bronze-fibre dress that she liked. Her face was smooth and plump, and not unattractive after a time. She looked more like a farmer's wife than a useful organizer on a security team. Mortlake preferred his women slimmer, under thirty and much less dangerous. Neither Mortlake nor the grumbling Pinder came close to Liston's vision of her ideal male, so their relationships remained without effort on a strictly professional level.

"We've got a bonus already," Mortlake remarked as he popped the plastic lid from the synth-café tin, which Pinder had left on the table.

"Well done." Liston smiled approval at the tightly packed javon. "I'd better report in before I try one. You know how much Charles disapproves of smoking those things."

"Sobokander kerel," drifted out of the bathroom.

"Tex Bleiler and I have got a competition going," said Mortlake. "Devising strange and terrible ways of finishing off Charlie Demirell."

"That sounds fun." Liston gave him a smile of maternal tolerance, looking down from an age advantage of six years.

Mortlake touched his lighter to a javo, inhaled deeply and returned a beam of pure contentment. "The NTF have got a point. The world looks a whole lot better when you light one of these. Your coffee's going cold, Lulu,"

Liston took her mug into the kitchen to make a quick videolink call to a minor Refuse Reclamation Centre on the outskirts of the coastal town of Duddling. She quite liked Charles Demirell. He was a good field commander, in her opinion. He also commanded loyalty and rewarded that quality generously, and he was always ready to show his

appreciation of a job well done. The Ice Queen, as her staff called Ilse Dortmann, the Duke of Atmain's security executive, was not so free with bonuses.

But, Liston admitted, being fair, Dortmann's budget was much more tightly controlled than Demirell's. And she didn't have a large and untraceable income from smuggling to distribute to the troops. And she didn't have the freedom to be pally with staff sharing common, illegal dangers. Dortmann was *Vreitan Correct And By The Book*. Which was why Charles was in charge in Camerland and making such a good job of it.

II / DEVELOPMENT

Saturday, Halgary 20th

13. Sir Miles Dunstan Assaults A Piano

“... but are expected to improve,” said the holovision newsreader. She looked squarely at another camera, projecting seriousness mingled with a certain intimacy.

“A large group of terrorists attacked a Refuse Reclamation Centre in Mirbank last night. The centre and many of the neighbouring buildings suffered extensive damage following a massive explosion in the incinerator plant. For an on-the-spot report, over now to Martin Ellston in Mirbank.”

The newsreader's serious expression dissolved into a scene of destruction as seen from the air. After an abrupt jolt, the aerial camera settled on a brick wall to show the viewers its collapse in full three-dimensional colour.

“... dead and nine injured.” As usual, the voice-over began in the middle of a sentence. “Several terrorist groups have claimed responsibility for the attack, but police sources are discounting all such claims as attempts to gain notoriety by association. Units of the local Special Service Troop were on the scene within minutes of the alarm being raised, but were unable to prevent the explosion that demolished the heart of the reclamation centre.

“A police spokesman said that the attack was pressed home rapidly and with great determination. A number of simultaneous diversion calls split the police forces in the vital early states. It is thought that the bulk of the raiders were so-called NeoKirlans, but the pattern of the raid suggested the involvement of a certain political fringe group.”

“If he means the bockan PSF, why doesn't he say so?” demanded Sir Miles Dunstan, the Refuse Baron victim of the outrage. He snatched his shoulder-length blond wig from his bald dome and threw it into the air. It landed on his wife's breakfast news sheet. She threw the wig straight back.

“The Terrorist Information Act, Miles,” she told her husband patiently. “They're not allowed to encourage extremists with publicity. And there's no need to take it out on me.”

“You're handy,” snapped Dunstan furiously. “Sorry.”

"... Dunstan of Dunstan Disposal had no comment to make," continued the reporter. "It is thought that the Refuse Barons are planning a massive up-grading of security at their reclamation centres. In anticipation of this, firms such as the Security Advisory Corporation and General Security are expected to improve on their gains of Friday when the stock market reopens on Monday."

"This is the most destructive of a series of recent attacks on Refuse Reclamation Centres. In a statement made at his home, the Prime Minister, Gordon Bennet, repeated his earlier assurance that the government is seriously concerned about these attacks, which strike at the heart of the economy. He does not, however, consider the situation serious enough to warrant government action. 'There are far too many people prepared to overstate our difficulties,' he said. 'The country is not on the brink of disaster, and we will not be panicked into hasty action.' A parliamentary select committee is to be set up to study the whole problem of violence against industry as a form of political protest."

"And a fat lot of good that's going to do anyone," snarled Dunstan. "This Bennet idiot will have to go."

"He's got so much Union backing, it'd take a bomb to shift him," observed his wife.

The scene on the holovision set changed to a section of elevated expressway. A broken guard rail filled the screen, then the camera dived beyond it to a column of smoke rising from a crumpled, blackened heap of scrap metal. There was no way of telling what the object had been.

Sir Miles Dunstan gouged at the *off* panel of the controller savagely. "I feel like breaking something. What is there?"

"There's always that dreadful piano Julia wished on us," suggested his wife.

"Bockan good idea!"

The Refuse Baron jammed his blond wig on like a hat and strode across the room to a cabinet full of implements of destruction. He selected a double-headed axe and a mace and chain. A grapefruit-sized steel ball studded with wicked spikes hung from the chain. Lady Jean Dunstan continued to scan her morning news sheet. An absent smile drifted onto her delicately-lined face when the sounds of pianolic destruction and wild cries reached the breakfast room.

After a few minutes, she set the news sheet aside and located the holovision controller. The screen shimmered into life in the middle of an account of an attack on a Refuse Reclamation Centre at Sulport in the south-west. Three cars fitted with two-inch light mortars had sprayed

the centre with smoke bombs and a token sprinkling of high explosive. All three carloads of terrorists had escaped after causing severe disruption and very little damage.

At the end of the report, Lady Jean switched the set to its communication function. She keyed the number of their doctor. Her husband could not be restrained when he was in one of his destructive moods. Lady Jean saw it as her duty to have the family physician standing by in case Miles overtaxed himself. Smashing pianos was not a particularly suitable hobby for a seventy-year-old.

14. Sovershend And Sandy Make Plans

As his watch was slithering towards the hour of thirteen. Devrel Sovershend was keying out a number on his videolink. He wanted to tell Sandy that he was prepared to do business. The white 'calling' disc pulsed for over a minute.

At last, the screen swirled into a picture. Sandy's name described his hair, which was abundant, unkempt and flattened on the right side. He looked every one of his fifty years – and a few more besides. Most of his bedroom was lost in semi-darkness, yet his eyes were screwed to slits. A comical expression of misery drooped his mouth. He was alone in the disorder of a double bed, the lower part of his legs covered by a dark, shiny sheet, the rest of him encased in a rich purple sleepsuit.

"Sorry to drag you out of your coffin so early in the afternoon," grinned Sovershend. "But I think we have some business to discuss."

Sandy groaned and kicked his feet free of the sheet, struggling to get his brain working. From the angle of view, Sovershend judged that the videolink was mounted on a bedside cabinet. Exhausted by his brief exertion, Sandy lay back and closed his eyes. "Meet me here in an hour," he managed. Then he gave an address in Iston, the district to the north of the city centre.

"Make sure you tell your building's security to expect me," Sovershend warned, not trusting Sandy to think of this basic precaution himself.

"Right, right. Just get here on time." Sandy broke the connection with evident relief. "I don't know what the older generation's coming to," Sovershend told the vid screen. His reflection in the newly formed mirror seemed to agree with the sentiment.

The roads were crowded with Saturday shoppers and delivery vehicles when Sovershend set a north-easterly course. Thanks to the twin

'blessings' of the cyclo-charged engine with its high fuel economy and the Clinton Process, which offered the immediate prospect of manufacturing petrol from humble weeds, private motorists were facing the future with greater optimism.

Doom and gloom merchants continued to make bleak forecasts about the levels of oil reserves under the Inland Sea, but encouraging survey reports from the western approaches to southern Camerland had restored a few smiles. And the 'petrol plants' for industrial-scale trials of the Clinton process could be seen growing almost visibly from early spring to late autumn in most of the national parks.

An increasing burden of legislation in favour of heavily-subsidised public transport had failed to relieve congestion on the streets of larger towns and cities. The basic unreliability of strike-prone public transport, coupled with a growing mood of individual independence, had kept private cars on the roads, especially in the capital. The reckless parker was a perennial problem.

As usual, the Traffic police were hard at work. Commonly known as Wasps after the yellow band on their police blue riot helmets, they were to be seen on all the main roads, collecting spot fines from outraged motorists and applying to the wheels of unattended and illegally parked vehicles their massive, cast iron clamps, which were known as *Robbin Boots* after the Minister of Transport who had introduced them.

Crawling along at an occasional 20 mph, but often slower, Sovershend noticed the odd inert figure lying tidily at the edge of the pavement, awaiting collection and revival. Some people would never learn that it was futile to attack a Wasp who pounced on thoughtless or illegal parking. But a *Boult* riot gun merely delivered a stunning nerve shock, which rendered an assailant non-violent for about one hour. And at least one survey had arrived at the conclusion that some people derived a strange satisfaction from the non-lethal death-encounter of being shot by a riot gun.

It took Sovershend a good twenty minutes to cover just over four miles. After an interminable wait, he managed to turn right across the road and approach his destination. He entered a brightly-lit cavern at the side of an apartment block. A series of blinking green lights guided him down a ramp and into a three-sided concrete pen. He locked his sleeve gun in the dashboard as a pair of beefy security guards approached.

They checked him over with a weapons detector, and ran an explosives snooper over the car, maintaining what was intended to be an intimidating silence. "All right," grunted the larger of the guards with

an air of disappointment. "He's clear."

The other guard returned Sovershend's identity card, maintaining his strong silence. Satisfied that Sovershend had business in the building, he escorted the visitor to the lift. The building's security computer began to keep track of another source of infra-red radiation, adding to its store of constantly up-dated information on human numbers and locations for use during an emergency, such as a fire.

Sandy was looking almost human when he dismissed the escort and let Sovershend into his flat complex. He had exchanged his sleepsuit for a safari blue pullover and a pair of loose, chalk-stripe trousers. His bare feet were thrust into light sandals.

The miracles of modern medicine, thought Sovershend. *Svey joget!* He paused at the end of the short entrance hall. *What an addle! It's like a junk shop after a gas explosion.*

The apartment's living area looked as though it had been hit by a 'lenster convention. Judging from the state of the furniture, the 'lensters had brought a car crusher with them. And there was something odd about the room. Sovershend realized that the furniture had been moved from the centre to provide space, and placed in such a way as to frustrate its normal use. A dining chair stacked on top of an armchair obscured the videolink. There was another of the dining set standing in front of a cupboard, reversed to prevent anyone sitting from on it and hiding the door handle. An armchair pushed right up against a holowindow sported a bright red plastic helmet.

Someone, Sovershend decided, had been mixing booze and *travel greens*, and then tuning in to an emotive image pattern tapped from the holowindow.

Sandy dismissed the state of the room with an inclusive wave. "Had a bit of a party last night. Still, not much damage done."

"No more than a lot," agreed Sovershend, finding himself with an unexpected view of the kitchen.

"Party games. They sometimes get a bit out of hand," said Sandy, explaining away the neat circular hole in the wall.

Rather your place than mine, thought Sovershend. He picked up a glass from a tray on the cocktail cabinet to sample the fortbeer dripping from a leaky barrel into a huge silver ice bucket. Sandy found a packet of Heitainan cigars among a heap of wrapping papers and empty cans.

"You have news for me?" he prompted, offering the cigars.

"Right," nodded Sovershend. "I've been in touch with some people in Dungard. The job's on if you're delivering enough cargo to interest them."

"Good! Martin said you were the right man for the job."

"Well? How much are you bringing in?" asked Sovershend.

"Oh! Er, seven hundred and sixty-eight cases. Which sounds rather an odd figure, but it's correct."

Sovershend took out a pocket computer and tapped at the keyboard. "It's the way they pack them. In multiples of thirty-two."

"Is it?" Sandy's tone was one of total lack of interest.

"My fee will be £5,161," added Sovershend, taking an extra profit of one shilling.

"How do you arrive at that?" asked Sandy, querying the method of calculation, not the result.

"You sell to the large distributors at eleven pounds four shillings a bottle, forty-five per cent of the shop price. I'm getting five per cent of the value of your shipment, remember?"

"Hmmm," nodded Sandy, not too impressed by the cold facts. He disappeared into another room for a moment, and returned with five one-ounce gold currency wafers in blue plastic wallets. "Half now, half afterwards. That's usual?"

"Fine by me." Sovershend accepted without protest a very generous half.

"I'd like to meet these people in Dungard," added Sandy.

"I've fixed a meeting for Monday morning."

"Ah, good!" Sandy looked surprised and impressed. "Is there somewhere decent we can stay overnight on Sunday? I always find travelling a long distance before a business meeting puts one at an immediate disadvantage."

"We could try the Mitton Gardens." Sovershend suggested the most expensive hotel in the city.

Sandy just shrugged, which told Sovershend that he was either very rich or he didn't know Dungard. Sovershend rolled the armchair away from the videolink and keyed *GEN INF* on the keyboard. Then he consulted the air travel section of the general information directory.

"There's a flight from Blake Airport at seventeen-thirty tomorrow," Sovershend told Sandy, choosing one which fitted his plans for the day.

"Fine," called Sandy. "Fix it up."

Sovershend made travel and accommodation arrangements wearing a ghost of a smile. There was plenty of money to be made out of Sandy – as long as he could take his associate's unconsciously arrogant treatment of the hired help without developing a desire to shoot him.

"How do we pay for all this?" Sovershend asked when his videolink negotiations were complete.

Silence answered him. Sandy had wandered off somewhere. Sovershend investigated a chalk-striped jacket, which was peeping out from beneath a shapeless mass of fabric and safety foam.

The name on the UniCredit card was Jules Sandford, but it was one of the 'any user' sort. Sovershend dropped it into the slot beside the videolink's keyboard. A green *credit confirmed* light glowed when he touched the *ADJ* key.

"I'll meet you at Landitch Station about sixteen tomorrow," Sandy called through the hole in the kitchen wall, proving that he had some idea of the Sunday timetable of O/U trains to the airport.

"I've left all the details in your vid memory," replied Sovershend. Realizing that he had been dismissed, he replaced the credit card in the packet of the abandoned jacket and looked for an ashtray. His cigar had started to disintegrate. Someone had hidden the ashtrays or they had been stolen. He solved the problem by dropping the dying smoke into the ice bucket beneath the dripping tap of the fort-beer barrel.

When he reached his home again, Sovershend placed a call to the local office of Ferran International Airlines. A young girl with a wide display of perfect, white teeth switched the call through to a man with hole-black hair and an olive tan.

"Hello, here's someone with a job for me," grinned Calvin Laurence, who used his job with Ferran International as a cover for his activities as a part-time agent of the Ferran Overseas Intelligence Department, one of many tentacles which spread from the land-locked Republic of Ferron.

"Just a simple check-up," Sovershend told him. "A kerel called Jules Sandford and a UniCredit card. The number is LDC-417-62114."

"And what do you want to know?" asked Laurence, who was known to his friends as *Cool Cal* because he had once spent three desperate hours locked in a cold store in the line of duty as a spy.

"Is he anything to do with His Majesty's Customs and Excise? Trying to entrap me into being a bad lad?"

"Cost you a bottle of uisge, Dev," grinned Laurence.

"Grabbing sobok! When are you and Lynn going to drop in to say hello?"

"We're going back home for a month later today."

"Drop in when you get back," invited Sovershend.

"We'll do that," promised Cool Cal. "Hello, we're getting something." He read from a line of green type, which had just appeared on his screen. "No Jules Sandford in your CustEx. And that UniCredit card was issued in Belldon."

“Interesting!” commented Sovershend. “Give my love to your charming wife. Isn’t it useful knowing a spy with access to official files?”
 “Isn’t it?” laughed Cal. “Wish I knew one. ‘Bye, Dev.”

Sovershend saluted and broke the connection, relieved that Sandy’s credentials had survived the check. The Ferran intelligence services were second to none, having been tried and tested over thousands of years.

The Ferran empire had once surrounded the Inland Sea. And even though Kraagen in the north and Belldon and Heitain in the south had squeezed the Ferran-speaking population of the mainland into a relatively small area, the Republic of Ferron continued to keep an eye on its former possessions. The eye tended to take a slightly rosy view of Camerland and Norland because their shared island had resisted domination by foreign tongues.

15. Major Tarpigan Reports

Long lines of vehicles jammed both lanes of the expressway. Impatient drivers leaned on their horns every so often, just to prove that they were there. Others settled back to listen to the sports results. Two of the drivers were in no hurry. They were prepared to wait for as long as it took to clear the wreckage ahead of human debris and drag away the twisted shells of vehicles.

Like many of the others, they were conversing with others in the jam on their radiolinks. Unlike the mob, however, they were broadcasting a low power, tight beam, which had a synchronized frequency shift to ensure complete privacy.

“That was quick work,” said Sir Nigel Grantby, chairman of the Camerlish Refuse Barons.

“You saw it on the vid, then?” replied Major Rufus Tarpigan, the leader of Grantby’s small band of mercenaries. Tarpigan was taking part in the ridiculous performance with the radios because his client expected it of him. He would have been quite happy to brief the Refuse Baron in a pub somewhere.

“I must admit your, ah, accident had a certain theatrical quality,” remarked Grantby.

“Cars diving off expressways always appeal to the HV lot,” said Tarpigan drily. “Especially if the wreck’s still burning when the camera crew gets there. They reckon it’s a waste of time otherwise. Mind you, some of them aren’t above splashing a bit of petrol about and getting it going again. Make the news report look fresh and ‘to the second’.”

"It came as something of a shock, though," interrupted Grantby. "I didn't realize you meant that Harold Wakefield."

"Why, how many do you know?"

"Well, none, I suppose. Now," admitted Grantby. "I'll probably have to go to his funeral. A member of parliament involved in PSF terrorist policies! Cardinal was right when he said they may have strange friends. Pity about his secretary."

"The luck of the draw," Tarpigan replied unsympathetically. "There are no innocent by-standers where the PSF is involved. And he wasn't all that innocent, the secretary. The other one didn't make the news."

"What other one?" asked Grantby, slightly alarmed at the Major's efficiency. He had been expecting the mercenary to take at least a week to arrange the first accident for a PSF policy maker, not a single day.

"A kerel called Trench," returned Tarpigan. "The smallest of the *Big Eight*, as the PSF call their policy circle. He was a teacher at a rather tough school in south Leviton. The police reckon he ran into some of his pupils, who were on the way home from a party last night. They decided to do him over, but they *did* a little too hard."

A shudder chased along Grantby's spine. He found himself both repelled and fascinated by Tarpigan's casual attitude to human life. But he felt that he was doing a necessary surgeon's job – using the mercenary as a knife to cut out diseased, rotten growths to make society a better place. Tarpigan, of course, had no such delusions. His business was solving human problems, and one of the most direct methods was to remove the person or persons causing the problem.

"I see the PSF were busy again last night," the mercenary observed into a pause.

"At Mirbank and Sylport, yes. It cost Dunstan a piano."

"A piano?" repeated Tarpigan in puzzlement.

"Miles finds breaking something at times of stress does him far more good than all the pills in his medicine cabinet. As long as he doesn't work himself up to a coronary. And he had a tough meeting with the Union later on. They didn't like the Kirlan centre's staff being laid off because there's nothing for them to do any more."

"Should make them think twice before they make another contribution to PSF funds. But I doubt it."

"Future plans?" prompted Grantby.

"We're going to keep chipping away at the higher levels of the PSF as opportunities present themselves. We'll have to be careful, though. We don't want them to realize they're targets too soon and go underground. No sense in making life more difficult for ourselves. As for the rank-and-

file, most of them have committed firearms or explosives offences. It's just a question of pointing the police at them and letting the law take its natural course."

"The law's too much on the side of the criminal, these days," growled Grantby. "Especially when there's supposed to be a political element to the crime."

"We can balance that by helping the police with gathering evidence."

"Pity I can't mention your successes to my colleagues. It would cheer them up a little."

"If not a lot, Sir Nigel."

"Hello, is that some movement ahead?" Grantby added.

The sounds of revving engines drifted down the line of stationary vehicles.

"You never know your luck. Yes, we're off." Tarpigan started his own engine. "I'll get in touch with you in the usual way the next time I have anything to report."

"Very good, Major," said Grantby in dismissal, feeling like a combination of spymaster and field marshal.

16. Bleiler and Pnight with CHASM

Terry Bleiler and Brian Pnight, members of the Duke of Atmain's security staff, were trudging reluctantly along a deserted street in a clearance area of a Camerlish town. The buildings around them were four or five storeys high and built of stone or red brick. The materials grime-blackened and interchangeable at a distance.

Despite half a century's erosion, most of the structures seemed intact to a casual glance. They could have been waiting for the start of a new business week. Lack of money for demolition rather than archaeological significance had kept the assortment of offices and warehouses standing.

Forty minutes had passed since sunset. The summer sky was deepening blue and cloudless, and shadows had started to thicken ominously at street level. Staying close to the succession of buildings on their left, Bleiler and Pnight were trying to keep a lookout in every direction. They were in typical 'lenster country.

At least three teenage gangs were known to roam the area, discouraging outsiders in a variety of fiendish ways. Bleiler and Pnight had no desire to find out how much truth lay behind the horror stories associated with the district. They would rather have spent their Saturday night in a pub with Richmore, the third and youngest member of their

team. He had dropped them on the fringes of the empty quarter, and he had wagered that he would not be picking them up again.

"The things we do for bockan Demirell," muttered Bleiler, a thirty-one-year-old extrovert, who believed that life should be a succession of wild parties separated by no more than a modicum of work. "Here we are, risking life and limb to make sure Bekker and Ambrose of Nottridge get black eyes. And where's sobokandar Demirell?"

"Off enjoying himself somewhere," replied Pnight, who was four years older, an inch and a half taller, nine pounds heavier and, in his own opinion, ten times brighter than Bleiler, the team leader. "Why don't you quit if you don't like weekend work?"

"The pay's too good," said Bleiler shortly. "And I wouldn't give that sobok Charlie a free laugh. You're not telling me you're happy about strolling through 'lenster country?"

"We're not the only ones risking our lives. I take comfort from that. And we're not exactly empty-handed." Pnight patted his Mac-40, fourth-generation sub-machine gun affectionately. The compact, easily concealed weapon could empty its forty-two-round magazine as either a two-second stream of death or as a succession of three-round bursts.

"What a bockan daft thing to say," groaned Bleiler. "Who else is risking his life? And how does that help us?"

"The kerel linking for Sandy. He's not going to be doing much breathing after next Wednesday. Not after Lilly Mellbury gets her hands on him."

"Oh, yes, that does us a lot of good, doesn't it? That sobok Sovershend getting done in. Still, it serves him right for getting mixed up in something illegal like smuggling. Demirell's got a nerve, sending us out on a job like this."

"He doesn't approve of CHASM. I bet they wouldn't let him join," Pnight added with a soft, cynical laugh.

"There's something wrong with a bloke who makes jokes at a time like this," muttered Bleiler, gripping his police-issue Mac-40 in a white-knuckle clutch. "Yog' Demirell. I don't like the way some of these doors are wide open but none of the windows are broken. The two don't go together."

"Unbreakable glass." Pnight stopped at a corner and peered round it cautiously. "All clear."

"I know that," said Bleiler, trotting at his colleague's heels to the next corner. "It still looks wrong. And we should be at squad strength for a penetration this dangerous."

"Two of us are less conspicuous. And we're nearly there." Pnight

pointed to the end of the block. The street opened into a small square on the right.

"Maybe we might just get there after all," Bleiler muttered pessimistically.

Pnight quickened his pace, concentrating on his footing as he skirted the rim of a wide crater in the road.

"Stop! Stop!" hissed Bleiler urgently. "Look!"

He pointed to a column of grey smoke climbing raggedly from the middle of the square, where there was a sunken, paved section, which was surrounded on three sides by overgrown grassy banks. Wide, broken steps led down to it on the fourth side. A formless scream echoed from the hollow. Feet scraped on rotting concrete. A wave of dark-clad 'lensters charged towards Bleiler and Pnight, splitting the night apart with screams and the 'len's battle cry.

"Fervoeek! Run for it!" gasped Pnight.

Bleiler was already running, flicking his sub-machine gun from *safe* to *burst*. They sprinted to the first intersection, paused to loose off half a clip at the 'lensters to prove that they were armed, then ducked round the corner. The half-light and their sombre clothing made it impossible to guess the number of pursuers.

"In here," gasped Bleiler.

He ran blindly into an open doorway. Their feet raised clouds of dust from the rotting carpet in the foyer. A synthetic marble staircase gleamed whitely in one corner. Bleiler raced upwards, then paused at the first turning, at a moderately defensible position. Pnight skidded to a stop beside him. They held their breath and changed magazines as shouts, screams, and running feet approached – then charged on past the doorway.

"That was close!" gasped Pnight.

The footsteps grew fainter, slowed, stopped, then grew louder. Screaming their battle chant, the 'lensters poured into the building and formed an untidy mob in the gloom of the foyer. One of them, in the middle of the group, raised her hands over her head and spun round slowly. Then she let out a wild shriek and pointed towards the stairs.

Another of them echoed the scream of triumph and excitement then fired a shotgun at the ceiling. The explosion brought down a shower of plaster on the heads of his fellow eulengangers.

"No! Freeze!" Bleiler yelled loudly enough to deafen Pnight.

His colleague caught himself with his finger tightening on the trigger of his Mac-40, on the point of spraying forty rounds into the tightly-packed group of 'lensters. The targets had become a writhing, terrified

mass on the floor. To an accompaniment of liquid, grinding noises, they slowed to misshapen, inert lumps.

"What the fervoek?" gasped Pnight in utter amazement.

"Put it on safety," ordered Bleiler, pointing to Pnight's sub-machine gun.

Bleiler released all his breath in a long sigh of relief, then relaxed from his crouch to sprawl on his back across the staircase. Pnight reached over and helped himself when Bleiler took a cigarette case full of lifters from the inside pocket of his camouflage coveret.

"What the fervoek happened?" repeated Pnight, his scowl of bafflement barely visible in the liquid gloom.

"You've not seen it before?" Bleiler answered a question with a question.

"Seen what?" demanded Pnight.

All movement in the foyer had ceased. Occasional crunching noises drifted to the stairs.

"Tangleweb," said Bleiler. He lit the javon, then tested his torch to find out if it was still working. A white beam carved into the gloom.

"I've not really seen it now," protested Pnight.

"It's all around us," grinned Bleiler, feeling tension draining from his body. "It's something the Ferrans developed as a passive security device. But around here, it's being used as an anti-vandalism system. The idea is, you spread this stuff on the walls and ceilings, and hook it into a system of sensors. Normal things like walking around, shifting the furniture or having a smoke get ignored. But if you start smashing the place up or setting fire to it – pchung! The stuff grabs you."

"And what? Is it poisoned or something?"

"Nope. It clingy and contracts," said Bleiler with relish. "Squashes the life out of you."

"How bockan pleasant," shuddered Pnight, moving to the exact centre of the staircase. "There's something down there."

He directed his torch into the foyer. An object the size of a large suitcase was shoving what looked like plastic refuse sacks towards a black hole in the floor.

"Clearing up the wreckage," murmured Bleiler.

A head became detached from the main body of 'lensters and rolled to the door. The miniature bulldozer turned toward it, but lost interest when the head bounced down two steps and out into the street.

"How do know so much about this stuff?" asked Pnight.

"Demirell wants it in the castle grounds for the 'lensters. He needed someone to demonstrate it to and I was handy."

"To or on?" wondered Pnight. "And did he put it in the castle grounds? I won't every go for a walk again."

"The Duke wouldn't agree. He likes his walks too. And the stuff's illegal just about everywhere. Including this country. CHASM must have put it in here to keep the 'lensters frightened of them. Come on, let's get moving again."

Bleiler and Pnight descended the stairs as the mechanical janitor drifted away and the hole in the floor closed with a self-satisfied lack of haste. A series of dark splotches ran ahead of them into the street. The severed head had landed right way up in the gutter, and it was staring at a bedraggled terrier dog with an expression of uncomprehending horror.

The Duke of Atmain's agents set course for their destination in a slightly more optimistic frame of mind, which was not due entirely to the effects of Bleiler's javon. They knew that 'lensters are very territorial creatures. Now that the local tribe had been eliminated, there was every chance that they would not run into further trouble. Following a thread of smoke from the unattended fire, Bleiler and Pnight continued on at right-angles to their previous direction.

"That's it, there," said Pnight. He pointed down a gloomy street to a pub sign, which looked strangely out of place among a collection of closed warehouses.

"Must be," agreed Bleiler.

Bricks, stones, pieces of broken concrete, broken bottles, crushed cans and wind-blown, grimy shreds of news sheets littered the narrow street. Several years' bombardment by various missiles had rendered the sign indecipherable, but the pub was in the right place. Bleiler used a handy stone to tap out a recognition signal on a steel door set in the pavement. Moments later, the door lifted and parted in the middle, split by the steel arch on a goods lift. Bleiler and Pnight stepped aboard and descended into the depths.

Brilliant light washed over them as soon as the steel pavement door had closed. Eyes slitted, Bleiler and Pnight assumed an automatic defensive position, back to back, until they realized that the underground room held no immediate threats. Two huge, intimidating figures were waiting for them, wearing floor-length black robes and helmet/masks which made them a head taller than the visitors, both of whom were six feet tall in their rubber-soled combat boots.

"You can leave the weapons here, gentlemen," said one of the members of the Church of His Aweful Satanic Majesty. A complex design of silver crescents adorned his left sleeve. "My name is Ackroyd," he added

in a deep voice.

"I'm Scott," said Bleiler, handing over his Mac-40 and a *Noiseless* personal protection pistol. "He's Bond."

"As in Carson," added Pnight, mentioning the main character in a popular holovision series.

The room's single item of furniture was a column table of a crystal-like material with a rosy, internal glow. Ackroyd's unadorned companion deposited the weapons on restless golden designs, which seemed to distort their shapes.

"This way, vreitei," said Ackroyd. He gestured to a blank wall, which sprouted a door as if by magic. "You're a few minutes early."

"We're lucky to be here at all, Brother Ackroyd," said Pnight as they entered a tenebrous corridor panelled in dark wood. "We had some 'lenster trouble on the way."

"You were shielded by His Hand," pontificated Ackroyd. "And it's just plain Ackroyd. Only the opposition and primitive trade unionists call each other 'brother'."

"Oh, right," said Pnight alias Bond. "Yeah, the whole bockan 'len got crushed by tangleweb."

"Best thing for them. If you would care to wait in here?" Their guide magicked another door into existence.

Bleiler and Pnight found themselves in a dimly-lit lounge. The room was about the size of a precinct shop-unit. They threaded a path through a group of easy chairs to the inviting sparkle of the bar.

"What can I get you, sirs?" asked the topless barmaid. The subtle flattery of the bar's lights was unnecessary. She was easily the most beautiful woman that either Bleiler or Pnight had ever seen.

"How about excited?" wondered Bleiler, admiring the magnificent view.

"If you wish," agreed the barmaid, much to his surprise.

"Pity we've only got a few minutes," he remarked with sincere regret. "How about a large marivodka as a very poor alternative?"

"Certainly," beamed the barmaid. "And your friend?"

Pnight tried to retract his eyeballs.

"Oh, please stare," encouraged the barmaid, aiming herself directly at him. "It's expected."

"Same again, please," mumbled Pnight. "Svey yoget! I never thought it was all true."

"Oh, yes," enthused the barmaid. "We of the Church of His Aweful Satanic Majesty are dedicated to the pleasures of the flesh. It's our solemn duty to bring pleasure to all, whether or not they wish to be

pleased. It's the duty of the Church Militant to take our message to all mankind. Only through the release of repression can mankind reach true fulfilment."

Bleiler and Pnight gulped down marivodka, hoping that CHASM would send round a few missionaries to brighten their Sunday. The light of the lounge had a reddish cast, which was intended either to represent a hellish glow, or to tint faces in order to conceal embarrassment. As the barmaid seemed quite comfortable, despite her state of semi-undress, Pnight decided that he was sweating because the room was warm.

"We're ready for you now, vreitei." Ackroyd materialized behind them.

The visitors finished their drinks, gazed longingly at the barmaid one last time, then followed Ackroyd to the door. By some miracle, it gave not into the corridor but into a large, high space filled with shifting, rather sinister shadows. All five walls of the ceremonial chamber were decorated with unfathomable shapes in shades of red flame paint ranging from livid flesh tones to almost-black. A dark blue ceiling was dotted with stars arranged into unfamiliar constellations labelled with ciphers which appeared to be first cousins of astrological symbols.

The floor was dominated by a huge, shining white pentacle and a bordering mosaic which depicted a fair number of the pleasure of the flesh encouraged by CHASM. A weird glow pulsing from the five-pointed star enclosed by the white lines of the pentacle suggested colours, but none of the familiar rainbow spectrum. Ackroyd led them round the perimeter of the room, taking care not to step inside the pentacle. "Don't cross the white lines," he warned.

"Why not?" asked Pnight fearfully.

"Oh, the system is so delicately balanced, it takes ages to get rid of footprints," replied Ackroyd casually.

Pnight radiated confusion. Expectations of black magic, and possibly a human sacrifice on the altar at the heart of the pentacle, had come to nothing. *Just how seriously do this bunch take themselves?* he wondered.

Three men in flame suits were waiting for them in a small conference room. Ackroyd bowed to one of them, then withdrew. A table three yards long by one and a half yards wide took up most of the floor space but left an aisle one yard wide around its perimeter. Restful green walls formed a backdrop for a series of rather disgusting etchings, which began at the door and became more embarrassing in an anti-clockwise direction.

"Welcome, vreitei," said the tallest of the three men. "I am One."

Bleiler caught himself on the edge of a sarcastic retort. He waded

across the dark green carpet to shake the outstretched hand. "I'm Scott, he's Bond."

"As in Carson," added Pnight.

"My colleagues are Two and Three," continued One.

All three were fractionally taller than their guests, aged around forty and they appeared to have all their own hair and teeth. They seemed to glow with good health – not the trained, rugged fitness of Bleiler and Pnight, but an effortless and very enviable well-being.

If this Is Satanism, thought Pnight, *they can put my name down for it.*

"Shall we be seated?" suggested Two.

Another gigantic figure in a black robe appeared with a tray of drinks. Pnight watched the servant covertly when he left, apparently straight through a solid wall, trying to work out how CHASM performed its conjuring tricks. Bleiler unfolded a map of the county of Neal. He indicated a pencil cross on the coast, then repeated the information given to the National Temperance Front by his colleagues Mortlake and Pinder the night before.

The man known as Three filled a sheet of notepaper with times, strengths of smugglers and NTF squads, and other essential details.

"And how do you know all this?" prodded One at the end of the account.

"Pure luck," grinned Bleiler. "We were buying some noble rope-plant off an NTF kerel, and we told him we wanted to try the stuff before we made a deal. Like you do. We all got a bit bashtal, it was good stuff, and this kerel started going on about an ambush."

"He wouldn't shut up about it, more like," added Pnight, supporting the tale. "When he wasn't laughing his head off. Jumping all over Ambrose of Nottridge's Number Two was the funniest thing in the world to him."

"And it seemed daft to all that booze go to waste," Bleiler added. "So we though the best thing to do was tell you so you can stomp on the NTF and put the booze to good use."

"An excellent thought, vreitei," nodded One. "We see it as out duty to combat the NTF's rather narrow outlook. You deserve a reward for your efforts."

Bleiler assumed an expression of pleased embarrassment, indicating that he expected CHASM to be more rewarding than Ambrose Mellbury's organization.

"Perhaps a visit to our executive pleasure lounge?" suggested Two. "Wouldn't you agree, Vr. Bond?"

Bleiler tapped Pnight's shin with his foot to remind his colleague of his alias.

"Well, I don't know.." said Pnight. He had been expecting a more portable reward – which would allow them to leave the area as soon as possible. Bleiler delivered a kick instead of a tap to shut him up.

"Well, if you insist," Bleiler said to One with a smile of appropriate anticipation.

"Ackroyd will show you the way," said One.

"If you would follow me, vreitei?" There was a gowned and helmeted figure behind the visitors, extending a hand toward the open door in invitation.

Russell Richmore, the third member of Bleiler's team, had been ordered to call at the pick-up point every hour on the hour from midnight onwards. He had already made five fruitless journeys and he was convinced that the sixth would be an equal waste of time. The empty quarter of the town was said to be haunted. Richmore was convinced that the dismal canyons had swallowed up his unfortunate colleagues.

The morning was warm and fair, the sun a quarter of an hour above the horizon. Richmore, his fleshy face locked into a sulk, his full lips set in a pout, reached the rendezvous point – a disused car showroom. He dared not give up Bleiler and Pnight for lost until six o' clock.

The pattern of a tedious night continued. He had to spend five endless minutes in the showroom, seeing danger in every shadow, expecting to be attacked at every second. Then he would be allowed the relief of the ten-minute drive back to the group's temporary headquarters in a run-down motel.

Following a previous set of tyre tracks in the filth on the floor, Richmore backed to the rear of the four-by-ten-yard cave. He closed the ventilator to exclude a nauseating smell of illness and excess, and lit a honey-flavoured cigarette. His eyes were dry and gritty, the lids heavy despite a recent stimtab. He had managed a total of under two hours' severely disrupted rest during the night.

An unsettling, rhythmic noise intruded into rebellious thoughts. Richmore opened his window slightly. Two uncertain voices were singing happily, the words lost in the steady ticking of the car's engine. Richmore was about to close the window again when the word *Demirell* caught his attention. Concentrating, he picked out more words, and recognized the unofficial anthem of the Duke of Atmain's security staff. His colleagues were past the section on shared delights with Ilse Dortmann, the security executive, and they were cataloguing the evil

torments that they would like to inflict on her deputy.

Ever cautious, Richmore tugged a Mac-40 from its travelling clips on the driver's door and jacked a cartridge into the chamber. He set the weapon to full automatic, then he left the car and crept over to the office. The cubicle measured roughly two yards by three. It was glazed with milky jigsaw puzzles held together by plastic laminations, and painted the same dreary yellow as the walls of the showroom. Bleiler and Pnight were there, sprawled on a seat torn from the back of a car and smoking javon to maintain a pleasant haze.

"Where the ferveek have you soboken been?" demanded Richmore, taking advantage of his superiors' condition to give vent to his feelings. "I've just about worn a bockan groove in the road, driving up here to look for you."

"We've been in paradise," murmured Pnight dreamily.

"You can say that again," sighed Bleiler.

"The car's here," snapped Richmore. He turned on his heel and stalked back to their vehicle. If his superiors were unable to walk, then he had no intention of carrying them.

To Richmore's displeasure, Bleiler and Pnight were able to stagger. They had acquired a case of marivodka on their travels.

During the interminable ten minutes of their journey back to the motel, Bleiler and Pnight sprawled in the back of the car, giggling and tantalizing Richmore with hints of their adventures in CHASM's executive pleasure lounge. It was a frustrating and intensely annoying journey for Richmore.

He tried desperately not to believe his colleagues, but he was forced to admit that some of their tales were beyond their limited imaginations. He even began to wish that he had been chosen for the dangerous part of the assignment. CHASM's rewards sounded more than fair compensation for risking one's life in 'lenster country.

Sunday, Halgary 21st

17. Special Service Troop 42 Takes The Field

Brightening false dawn was bringing a new day to a nameless collection of buildings on the fringe of the Losemore National Park. In the main, they were decaying shells, but a wisp of smoke escaping from the chimney of one of them showed that they had not been forgotten completely. As the night had been warm, the watchers concluded that the smoke belonged to a cooking fire.

They could see ten buildings, five on either side of a broken road, staggered such that the first house on the northern side of the road faced the second on the southern side. Two lanes of pot-holed tarmac connected the hamlet with the expressway to the south west, and died away to nothing in the national park. A small wood behind the houses on the southern side of the road was the source of the fuel for the cooking fire.

The hamlet lurked in a hollow between crescent-shaped hills to the north-west and south-east, which shielded it from expressway traffic noise. Beyond the northern hills, seemingly endless acres of 'petrol plants' sprawled to the horizon. They were to be the raw material for the Clinton Synthetic Motor Spirit process when it was perfected. They formed the basis of the charge that all national parks looked alike because of the large areas devoted to the cultivation of these vital weeds.

Eight dark green personnel carriers were parked on the link road to the expressway, hidden from the hamlet by the falling shoulder of the southern hills. Ulver-based Special Service Troop 42 was out on an operation. Acting on information supplied anonymously by Major Tarpigan, the paramilitary police unit was about to close in on a group of PSF activists. The unit expected to arrest the PSF cell that had attacked the Refuse Reclamation Centre at Sylport on Friday night.

Sections One and Five of the Troop were deployed on the forward slopes of the two hills. Sections Two and Four would approach the houses along the road. Both the Medical Section under Lieutenant Willsden, known affectionately as *Slasher Jenny*, and Corporal Dolan's Technical Section were still in their vans either checking equipment or

just sitting quietly on the grass, having a smoke.

Lieutenant Esterell, the troop commander, and Sergeant Leigh were to be found in the command vehicle, hunched over a small map table. Corporal Garvin, Esterell's driver, had managed to scrounge some real coffee. A change from the eternal coffee substitute was very welcome. Synth-café was fairly palatable but it was hardly the real thing. Not wishing to become an accessory, the Lieutenant had not asked about the source of Garvin's good fortune.

Both Esterell and his Troop Sergeant were compact men, no more than an inch taller than the minimum height, and trained to a dangerous grace which became apparent when they were in motion. They had police eyes but not police feet.

Sergeant Leigh was the elder by five years but he looked the younger. His fair hair was touched with grey above the ears. Very little black remained in the Lieutenant's hair. Leigh was married with two children who didn't mind having a *Hondo* for a father. Lieutenant Esterell was single, twenty-nine years old, and he had four chances in five of seeing thirty, according to current statistics.

His driver, Corporal Garvin, was also single, but he shared a house with his girlfriend and they had a young son. He was tall, dark, deeply tanned, good looking in a worldly way, two weeks from his twenty-fourth birthday and he intended to die in his own bed at the age of 102 after a life of debauchery.

"I think we've covered everything, Sergeant," decided Esterell. He ground the life from a honey-flavoured cigarette and finished his coffee. "Ten minutes to dawn."

Corporal Garvin handed them their riot helmets, his head bowed in the manner of a faithful retainer. There was just too little room in the van for him to stand upright. Sergeant Leigh took his compact Bakersfield assault rifle from the rack on the left hand wall of the van and checked the magazine. His superior smoothed the black leather glove on his artificial left hand, then armed himself with a Mac-40 sub-machine gun.

Corporal Garvin closed the rear doors of the van after his departing superiors and investigated the coffee pot. The life of a driver and personal aide suited him. There would be no crawling around dew-damped countryside for him. And no crouching in scanty cover, trying to grab a smoke. He decided that he would have time for another cup of coffee and a cigarette before *Old Iron Fist* required his services again.

"Looks very quiet," remarked Lieutenant Esterell, examining the hamlet from the crest of the hill. His binoculars were clamped in his

artificial hand.

"Too quiet," agreed Sergeant Leigh.

The thread of smoke from the cooking fire was the only evidence of human presence. Two of the houses looked reasonably weather-tight. The only other house with a complete roof lacked part of the front wall, and the roof was sagging inexorably towards the garden.

Surveillance from the hill tops had revealed that the middle houses on either side of the road had curtains on their shattered windows. Esterell noted that an irregular patch of roofing felt, glued down with pitch, covered part of the slate roof at the rear of the house nearer the wood.

"I wonder how many?" murmured Sergeant Leigh.

"We'll find out the hard way," returned Esterell.

Operations against the Popular Socialist Front were usually full of surprises. The strength of political activists could vary from two or three gangsters with shotguns to a well-armed, disciplined platoon. The intelligence report had said 'a handful'. How big a hand was not known.

Lieutenant Esterell stowed his binoculars in a pouch at his belt and clicked his helmet visor into its seal. "Off we go."

Sergeant Leigh reached forward with his chin to activate the transmit switch of his helmet radio. "Troop will advance."

Forty-two cases of the janglers faded as the Troop closed in on the hamlet. Uniformed figures in summer green and dark brown camouflage advanced in short rushes, leapfrogging by half sections. Ten cautious minutes later, they had established a tight containment circle.

The houses were spaced fifteen yards apart, their territories defined by either a rotting wooden fence or a waist-high wall of grey stone. Five yards of nettles, dandelions and limp, moss-choked grass separated the houses from the road. Fantastic vegetable gardens stretched for thirty yards behind them, full of head-high cabbages and marching mint.

Corporal Stevens and Four Section had confirmed that the first three houses at the park end of the hamlet were unoccupied and they were covering the next two – the ones with complete roofs and curtains. Corporal Johns and Two Section had found two vans and a car garaged in houses at the expressway end of the hamlet.

Completing the encirclement of the houses thought to be occupied, sections One and Five were posted at the foot of their vegetable gardens. Corporal Dolan and four Troopers were lurking in the long shadow of a stone wall, between One and Two Sections. The rest of Three Section, under the command of Trooper Beddows, had taken up positions on the other side of the road with Lieutenant Esterell.

The rising sun was a low, white disc, burning through a morning haze

from the bottom of a yellow to orange well. A nice day seemed threatened. Tiny transmitter darts flashed through the sunlight, burst through sacking curtains, and lodged in walls or ceilings, according to the angle of fire. The houses were one room thick, and they had two rooms on each of the ground and upper floors. One dart was placed in each room.

"Listening devices activated, sir," Corporal Dolan reported to Lieutenant Esterell over his helmet radio. "All quiet." His voice carried a strong trace of Norland.

"What do you have, Corporal?" returned his officer.

"They must have been relying on that electronic picket line we mopped up, sir. They're all asleep. Looking from the back of our house, we have four in the first floor left, four in the first floor right, and three in the ground floor right."

"What about our house?" Esterell asked Trooper Kinstrey, who was crouching beside him.

"Three in the ground floor left, sir. Two above them."

"What's behind those curtains? Glass? Boards?"

"Nothing, sir," said Kinstrey. "Our darts went right through."

"Same with ours, sir," added Corporal Dolan.

"Gas attack, as planned, Sergeant," ordered Esterell.

"Sir!" snapped Sergeant Leigh.

Four Troopers advanced up each back garden, taking care not to step on anything noisy. They stopped ten yards from their respective houses and aimed gas grenade projectors at the windows.

"Take aim," ordered Sergeant Leigh.

Eight men closed one eye and curled their trigger fingers.

"Three, two, one, fire!"

Gas canisters tore away sacking curtains, then exploded into dense, white, stupefying fog. The Troopers split right and left and raced for cover. A storm of explosive shot smashed into a stone wall moments later, blasting it to splintered chippings within inches of Corporal Dolan's head.

"Five active on the first floor of our house, sir," he reported to Lieutenant Esterell. "No, four. They must have had gas masks handy."

The Lieutenant glanced at Trooper Kinstrey, who gave him a double thumbs up. "All under the gas here, sir."

Lead began to fly in all directions as the group in the house across the road proved that they were both armed and dangerous. Esterell followed the stone wall, circling the terrorists' line of retreat to the road. Sergeant Leigh passed him a broadcast speaker.

"This is the police," boomed the Lieutenant, cutting through short, rapid bursts of automatic fire. "You are surrounded. Cease firing and throw your weapons out of the building."

A muffled, jeering shout and a burst in his approximate direction were the PSF's reply. They seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of ammunition. Troop 42, in contrast, was keeping its heads down and firing single shots, just reminding the opposition that they were surrounded and that there was no escape.

"So much for talking to them," remarked Esterell. "We'll put in concussive grenades from our side, Sergeant."

"Sir!" responded Sergeant Leigh.

Crouching behind bullet-proof screens, following the dubious cover of a woven garden fence, Corporal Morgan and three Troopers edged to the front of their garden. Their comrades kept up a steady barrage toward the front windows of the house across the street. The PSF replied by poking the muzzles of their weapons over the window ledge and firing at random.

The fence had been shredded to splintered gaps by the time Corporal Morgan and his men reached their position. Corporals Johns and Stevens increased their rate of covering fire. A storm of firing raged briefly at the back of the house. Then a leaden silence fell on the hamlet.

"They tried to make a break for it, sir," reported Corporal Gillan of One Section. "We put four down with riot guns."

"Well done, Corporal," returned Lieutenant Esterell. "We won't need your grenades, Corporal Morgan."

"Sir!" replied Morgan.

"I suppose honour is satisfied in some twisted way," the Lieutenant added to Sergeant Leigh. "They went down fighting to the last, even if they're only stunned by riot gun charges. What's happening in the houses, Corporal Dolan?"

"All quiet, sir," replied the corporal on charge of Three Section

"Check them over," ordered Esterell. "And watch your step."

"Sir!" Corporal Dolan switched his helmet radio to the Three Section channel and began to issue instructions.

On the other side of the road, Troopers Beddows and Kinstrey took a dislike to the back door of their house and started to check the right-hand window with a snooper. Deep scratches on the window ledge and a polished smoothness of the frame told them that they had found the preferred entrance.

Both were twenty-four years old, of average height, wiry-tough rather

than muscular and easily amused behind an air of professional detachment. Both had risen to the rank of corporal three times – but never for more than six weeks. Their outlook on life and the Police Code did not mix.

Corporal Morgan paused to watch them for a moment, bouncing a superfluous concussive grenade in his right hand. Beddows told him to go away forcefully. Cackling softly, Morgan continued down to the foot of the garden.

Ten minutes crawled past. The four riot gun-stunned prisoners had been carried away to be examined by Lieutenant Willsden's Medical Section. Willsden was grateful that her team had nothing more serious to do.

"Nothing much in our house, sir," Corporal Dolan reported to Lieutenant Esterell. "Just a few alarms. Beddows found tangleweb on the front door of his house, and the back door is mined. So is the staircase. Pressure switches on steps four, seven, and eleven."

"Tell them not to go upstairs until we've removed the prisoners," ordered Esterell. "Through one of the windows."

"Sir!" snapped Corporal Dolan.

"One of our prisoners is in a bad way, sir," reported Corporal Gillan from the northern side of the village. "She stopped a ricochet. The rest are undamaged." He paused for a moment. "Lieutenant Willsden says she's got a fair chance."

"Thank you, Corporal. Carry on." Lieutenant Esterell returned his attention to the house on the other side of the road.

The third and last prisoner was being passed through a ground floor window. He was encased in an orange sleeping bag and a splash of sunlight made him look very young and innocent. Two Bakersfield assault rifles and a box-like *Mac-40* followed the captives, then a battered travelling bag, two fairly new, bulging backpacks and a low-powered field radio transmitter.

"That's the lot, sir," reported Trooper Beddows.

"Very well. Carry on," nodded Lieutenant Esterell.

Beddows and Kinstrey moved away from the window, heading for the middle of the house and the staircase. There was a longish pause, then Beddows reported, "Both bedrooms clear. There's a toilet and bathroom between them at the front of the house. That's clear too. The window's bricked up because they've been using it as a darkroom. There's a cupboard full of photographic stuff."

"Tangleweb on the loft hatch," added Kinstrey. "There's something else up there but I can't get any clear readings."

"Leave the loft for the moment," decided Lieutenant Esterell. "Prisoners out first. Through the window again."

"Sir!" replied Kinstrey.

Corporal Dolan of the Technical Section trotted up to the lieutenant and saluted. "We've cleared the other house, sir. Nothing of any great interest, apart from a lorry-load of thirty-five calibre ammunition. Could come from that factory that got robbed about six months ago. My lads are having a scout round to see if there's anything buried in the area. Shall I have a look in here?"

"Yes, do that," nodded Esterell. "Watch the stairs."

A sleeping bag emerged from the window above their heads. Beddows and Kinstrey lowered it to the full extent of their arms, then let go. Two brawny Troopers from Five Section broke the prisoner's fall. She was around thirty, her dark brown hair a tangled mess, her pale face caught in a slight frown. The other sleeper was a man of about fifty. His expression was haggard, his cheeks drawn into deep hollows, his eyes sunk into grey pits. Their luggage followed – another of the box-like *Mac-40* sub-machine guns, a needle gun fitted with an extension barrel and a wooden stock, and two well-used backpacks.

"We'll need more equipment to tackle the loft, sir," reported Corporal Dolan.

"You're sure there's something up there, Corporal?" asked Lieutenant Esterell.

"Positive, sir. It's the only place they can store anything in the house. The rooms have been stripped bare. And they've gone to a lot of trouble to set up the mines and the web."

"Point taken, Corporal. What action do you propose?"

"We could try desensitizing the tangleweb, sir. But that's going to depend on luck. It could take the rest of the day. Or we could try going through the ceiling of one of the bedrooms. But..,"

"I take it Beddows is complaining about an ache in his wooden leg?" remarked Esterell, grinning invisibly behind his helmet visor.

"This place has a very bad feel to it, sir," confirmed Dolan. "We need to do a bit more checking."

"Carry on, then, Corporal. We have plenty of time."

"Sir!" snapped Dolan. "Back to the van, you two. Don't forget the stuff from the darkroom," he added to Kinstrey.

"Pack mule, that's me," muttered the Trooper rebelliously. "Get on with it," grinned Dolan. "What about the mines?"

"There's every chance they'll go off on their own in time." Beddows slipped a hand under his armoured padding to scratch his chest. "The

explosive's too crystallized to get the detonators out. And the wires have lost most of their insulation. Mice, probably. I've disarmed the triggers, so we'll be all right if everyone tiptoes."

"I want some breakfast before I do anything energetic," hinted Kinstrey, stuffing plastic bottles into a refuse sack.

Corporal Garvin appeared beside Lieutenant Esterell and handed him a mug of coffee. "I've brought our van up, sir, The Medical Section are parked behind us."

"How's the casualty?" asked Esterell.

"Lieutenant Willsden says she's stable. There's a chopper on the way to pick her up. Breakfast, sir?"

Esterell glanced at his watch. "Breakfast at five past five in the morning? Yogar! Yes, carry on, Corporal."

Two more dark green vans bumped along the pot-holed road, following the common set of tracks left by the medical and command vans. They crashed through a rotting fence and came to a stop in the back garden of the first house on the left. The concrete patio was cracked but still fairly level.

Sergeant Leigh hurried to complete his redeployment of the troop. Representatives of the news services had started to arrive. Corporal Morgan found himself blocking the advance of a freelance holovision unit, which had just appeared out of the petrol-plant wastes of the national park.

Watched by Five Section, the leader of the holovision unit attempted to secure a blind eye with promises of free tickets to a cinema with which she had an arrangement. Corporal Morgan stood to lose a bottle of uisge to Corporal Dolan if she had too low an opinion of his threshold of corruption.

Lieutenant Esterell strolled to his van to watch Corporal Garvin anchoring a spotless white tablecloth to a folding table. The van was parked beside a concrete post – all that remained of the garden fence between the first and second houses on the southern side of the road.

Sergeant Leigh trotted over to report. "Sections One and Five are keeping the newsfiends and others at bay, sir. Corporal Johns and three men are guarding the prisoners. Three section haven't found anything else in the area."

"Yes," nodded Esterell, "Corporal Dolan seems to think all their spare arms and equipment will be in the command house, where it would be nice and handy."

"There's an HV team trying to bribe Corporal Morgan, sir," the sergeant added with a grin.

"We'd better make sure that Five Section get their breakfast before Corporal Morgan becomes too weak to resist temptation. Keep an eye on him, Sergeant. He's a good section corporal but no diplomat. We need deaf ears at the moment, not the complication of unnecessary arrests."

"Sir!" Sergeant Leigh peeled off a regulation salute and turned for the road.

Corporal Garvin had set two places at the table, along with salt and pepper shakers, a jar of spicy Norlish mustard and a large ashtray. Esterell lowered himself onto one of the chairs and clamped a cigarette between the first two fingers of his artificial hand.

He had owned the glove for ten years, the hand beneath it for two. He could still relive the shock of finding nothing at the end of his arm. The memory was as vivid as the event on that wet, cold afternoon in November. Sergeant Watson had saved his life that day. Frank Watson, a giant of a man who had been a fanatical archer, had stopped the bleeding and carried Esterell on his back to the medical station.

The news of Watson's death, scythed down by a hit-and-run driver two months later, had been as hard to bear as the loss of his hand. The price of maintaining order always seemed to be paid by those who could be spared least.

"Coffee, sir," said Corporal Garvin, breaking the mood.

"Thank you, Corporal. You'll join me, of course?"

Garvin placed a second cup on the table and sat on the floor of the van. Esterell pushed a cigarette case over to him.

"Nice morning, sir," remarked the corporal, meaning that there had been no casualties on the police side.

"Yes, it is," nodded Esterell. "This place must have been quite pleasant in its time."

"Sir!" The agreement was automatic. Corporal Garvin was a confirmed city dweller and he did not understand the attractions of a pastoral life. He took a swipe at an early morning fly, which investigated the interior of the control van briefly then buzzed on its way.

An idling helicopter engine picked up to a takeoff scream, then headed for the expressway.

"There goes our wounded prisoner," remarked Esterell.

"More coffee before I get the breakfasts, sir?" asked Garvin.

"Let's enjoy it while we can," nodded Esterell, wondering how much his personal aide had managed to scrounge. "Tell me, what are the men up to over there, Corporal?"

"That's Corporal Dolan's mob, sir. They managed to turn the water on

in that first house on the other side. Saves setting up the field latrine.”

“All the comforts of home, eh? They’ll be queuing up for showers next.”

“I don’t think so, sir. There’s no hot water.” Corporal Garvin pretended not to see the point. He planted a dark green, duck-billed cap on his short, dark hair and looked past Esterell. “Will you be taking breakfast, sir?” he asked, retainer fashion, as the newcomer slid gracefully onto the vacant folding chair with a sigh of relief.

“If it’s edible,” nodded Lieutenant Willsden.

“Very good, sir.” Corporal Garvin tramped across a stretch of rampant weeds to the house, then followed uneven paving to the road.

“Any luck with the prisoners?” asked Esterell.

Lieutenant Willsden shrugged. “Fat chance. Most of them are just soldiers, fighting for their cause, any cause, because it gives them an excuse to run wild with a fair chance of getting away with it.”

“Anyone likely to help us neutralize that house?”

“The ones likely to know anything have been given deep hypnotic conditioning. And probably a negative tolerance to the usual interrogation drugs.”

“Oh, well,” said Esterell philosophically. “Corporal Dolan and his men ought to be equal to anything the PSF can throw at them. How about identifications?”

“Some known trouble makers. A couple of them have even served short sentences for assault. Two others are wanted for questioning in connection with an armed robbery on a security vehicle. The rest are apparently respectable members of the local community. I’d say you’ve scooped up all the commanders of this cell.”

“Where would we be without informers?”

“At this time of the morning? Still in bed.”

“Looks like they were having a party to celebrate their efforts at Losebridge on Friday night. There’s enough empties around to keep a Rec Centre going for a week. Perhaps we won’t be hearing too much from the PSF for a while.”

“If not them, then someone else,” said Willsden with a sad smile. “At least I had nothing to do.”

“I warned the men about that,” smiled Esterell. “I always find the sight of blood puts me off my breakfast. Perhaps I lack the soul of a butcher.”

“Yes, we all know how sensitive you are, Richard,” scoffed Willsden. “Soldiers and surgeons, we’re both in the same profession – blood-letting.”

“One rather more constructively than the other, Jan.”

"Perhaps so. What's that you're drinking?"

"Garvin managed to get hold of some real coffee."

"Oh! I wonder if he got any tea? I could do with a change from that weird Arcade mixture. Will we be here long?"

"That's rather up to Corporal Dolan and Technical Section," smiled Esterell. "Why not relax and enjoy the sunshine?"

"Fat chance of that!" complained Willsden. "I've got to check over all the prisoners to make sure they're in good condition before we get rid of them."

"That shouldn't take too long."

"And then I have a mountain of record work to get through. And we'll be stuck here until bockan Beddows and Kinstrey have qualified the troop for an extended duty bonus." The corners of her mouth slipped upwards into a smile. "It's a tough life in the CSP, isn't it?"

"I'm sure you'll survive, Jan," laughed Esterell.

Corporal Garvin returned with three stacked plates. He set two of them on the table and retired into the van with the third. Sounds of metal on plastic filtered out from behind the communications equipment, then the singing of an electric kettle.

"Are you making some tea, Corporal?" asked Willsden.

"Tea, sir?" repeated Corporal Garvin, as though he had never heard the word before.

"Finish your breakfast first," laughed Willsden. "We can't have you collapsing from starvation."

"You're so good to me, sir," drifted out of the van.

"Have you ever noticed the funny look on the Chief Director's face when someone calls a lady officer *sir*, Jan?" asked Lieutenant Esterell.

"A *lady officer*, Richard?" Perfect teeth flashed behind Lieutenant Willsden's smile. "I rather like that. So that's what it's all about. I'd written him off a permanently constipated. He's one of the *ma'am* brigade, is he?"

"Definitely opposed to the *De-sexing of Service Personnel* in imitation of those Ferran idiots. You can almost hear the capitals when he's on about it."

"I think I prefer it," decided Willsden. "My commission came through just a few weeks before the new ruling came into effect. Time enough to be called mam, mum, marm, merm and a host of variations. You know where you are with sir. Even the robot-like *Sahr!* your men seem to prefer. Not quite the same scope for sarcasm. Is that tea ready, Corporal?" she added as a stifled chuckle seeped from the command van.

"Just pouring it out now, mum. I mean sir," replied Garvin.

"The engine of our van is getting awfully dirty. You don't happen to know anyone who'd like to volunteer to polish it, do you, Corporal?" Willsden asked sweetly.

"Me, sir? No, sir!" Corporal Garvin emerged from his hiding place with a large mug of tea and the coffee percolator.

Having served the officers, the corporal picked up two strips of plastic and jumped down to the grass. "Permission to put up the signs, sir?" he asked Lieutenant Esterell.

"What signs?" frowned Esterell in bafflement.

"They've got the water going in the end house of this row as well, sir." Garvin hooked a thumb over his right shoulder. Then he turned the plastic signs over to display the legend: *OFFICERS ONLY*.

"Carry on, Corporal," said Esterell, biting back a smile.

"I thought *Old Iron Fist* wasn't supposed to have much of a sense of humour?" laughed Willsden when the corporal was out of earshot.

"Only when the maintenance of discipline is threatened."

"Please, Richard, no lectures," ordered Willsden. "I know all about the importance of commanding the respect of your command, as one of the lecturers at the college put it. I also know all our lives may depend on instant obedience to your slightest whim."

"That's something you have to believe as well as know."

"We're in a very serious mood this morning. What you need is a spot of diversion. Something to chase away all your buried tensions."

"And what would you prescribe, Doctor?" asked Esterell, maintaining a serious expression,

"A visit to my quarters when we sign off. With a friend. No, make that two. White wine, preferably."

Esterell broke into a smile of total amusement. Willsden slammed her mug down and started to rise to her feet.

"Well! If that's what you think of the idea!" she said angrily.

"No, no, Jan." Esterell tried to catch her arm with his gloved left hand, but the fingers failed to open. "I'm sorry. It's a marvellous idea. It's just that, well . . ."

"Well, what?" demanded Willsden, dropping back onto her chair for the explanation.

"It's just the significant glances in our direction. I can almost hear the men asking themselves if *Old Iron Fist* ever gets anywhere when he chats up *Slasher Jenny*."

"Oh!" said Willsden quietly. "I'm sorry, Richard. I don't know what got into me. I think nothing happening has left me on edge. I wonder if

they know you do get somewhere when I'm in a more reasonable mood?"

"Probably," Esterell shrugged. "Very little escapes them. Especially when it's none of their business. I hadn't realized you were so much on edge."

"I'm never at my best this early in the morning," smiled Willsden. "And having nothing to do but routine stuff . . ."

"I think you need a rest," countered Esterell. "I think we both need to get away for a few days. Hello, back to business."

Sergeant Leigh marched up to the table and peeled off a magnificent salute. "Ready to rotate the perimeter guard, sir."

"Carry on, Sergeant," nodded Esterell. "How are things?"

"Four holovid outside broadcast vans on the road from the expressway, sir. They can't get past our vans. And Traffic reports an increase in the popularity of our bit of the expressway. We seem to be gathering a fair audience. Can't think what they expect to see."

"You'd better put a tape fence across the ends of the village. Anyone crossing the tapes or entering the gardens is to be put down with a riot gun for their own protection."

"Sir!" Sergeant Leigh saluted again, then doubled away.

"I suppose I'd better get back to work," decided Lieutenant Willsden. She inspected her mug for damage. Finding none, she drained it.

"And I'd better check with Corporal Dolan," said Lieutenant Esterell. "If I don't see you later, I'll see you back at Terbridge. And I'm serious about that leave."

"I do believe you are." Lieutenant Willsden tucked a stray chestnut curl under her uniform cap and headed across the overgrown garden to the *OFFICERS ONLY* house, starting to feel the benefit of food and affection on a weary morning.

18. A Display For Holovision

Sitting in his van, composing a report, Lieutenant Esterell found himself distracted by the numbers of the sightseers. Over fifty vehicles had parked on the uneven, grassy mounds beyond the hard shoulder of the expressway. Corporal Garvin had been monitoring the Traffic Division's communication channels while working his way through a second breakfast. Sergeant Leigh had estimated the crowd at approaching one hundred. He too was surprised to see so many people out and about at zero six hundred hours on a Sunday morning. Given the choice, he would have preferred to have been in his bed with his wife.

Very little had happened to reward the patience of the spectators. The prisoners and their luggage had been removed by road. Troopers Beddows and Kinstrey could be seen occasionally, moving about on the first floor of one of the houses, charting the positions of the objects in the loft. Kinstrey had opened the visor of his riot helmet just enough to admit his long cigarette holder. The arrangement kept smoke out of his eyes, and with the air-cycler turned up to double the normal rate, he was in no danger of becoming smoke-bound inside his helmet.

Out of sight of all officers, commissioned and otherwise, Beddows had removed his riot helmet but retained his communications headset. He maintained that the helmet made his scalp itch and that a man cannot concentrate when part of him is screaming to be scratched. The two of them were taking their time, partly to qualify the troop for an extended duty bonus and partly because the reputation of the PSF justified caution.

The eighteen men and two corporals of Sections One and Five, most of the Medical Section and half of Three Section were much more visible as they haunted the canteen van to the disgust of a mob of parched civilians. Corporal Dolan and the rest of his section were shut away in their van interpreting information relayed to them by Beddows and Kinstrey.

Report writing, the curse of the police force, occupied Lieutenant Willsden. A cup of pale orange Arcade tea, steaming on a locker beside her improvised writing table, served to remind her of the real thing as supplied by Corporal Garvin at breakfast. Rising wages in the producing countries were slowly forcing tea into the luxury bracket to join coffee and other sometime everyday commodities.

Half an hour later, and within comfortable reach of an extended duty bonus, Corporal Dolan reported to his troop commander. Troopers Beddows and Kinstrey and Sergeant Leigh also invaded the command vehicle.

"We found six containers up there, sir," said Corporal Dolan, tapping at the keyboard of the videolink to call up a map of the loft. "Strong metallic signals from all but one of them. These two over the middle of the right-hand bedroom contain weapons. The ones behind them are ammunition. The one right over here, well away from everything else, is probably explosives."

"I see," nodded Esterell. "Very odd. How accurate are these dimensions?" He pointed to the bold green figures beside the six oblong box-shapes.

"To within half an inch, sir. Yes, they are too big to have gone up

through the loft hatch. Looks like they went in through the hole in the roof."

"How about removal? A hole in the ceiling?"

Trooper Kinstrey coughed and assumed an expression of reluctance and doubt. Lieutenant Esterell raised his eyebrows in invitation, stretching his thin face.

"It's nothing concrete, sir," explained Trooper Beddows. "It's just there was some odd slush on our signals."

"And?" prompted Esterell.

"There may be a passive network up there, sir. Linked up with the explosives. You can look all you want, but disturb it by chopping holes in things and boom! Goodbye, Charlie."

"They reckon that's what got those blokes from 97 Troop last month, sir," contributed Kinstrey.

"I see," nodded Esterell. "Recommended action, Corporal?"

"I'd have said the technology is beyond the PSF, sir." Corporal Dolan's Norlish accent strengthened when he was deeply involved with a technical problem. "Until recently. And there was something similar to this slush reported by the blokes from 97 Troop."

"Very well. We'll proceed extremely carefully," said Esterell. "Especially with all these HV teams camped on our doorstep."

"I wonder if they forgot to include the roof in the network?" Corporal Dolan asked himself thoughtfully.

"Sergeant," said Esterell, "did I see a helicopter swanning around over the expressway? One of ours?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Sergeant Leigh. "A Forrester Mark Eight. One of the Traffic jobs."

"Present my compliments to whoever's in charge of it and ask them if we can borrow it for a while. Beddows and Kinstrey are going to put on a show for the news-fiends."

"Sir!" Sergeant Leigh retired into his helmet.

"Permission to report I suffer from airsickness, sir?" said Beddows.

"I'm sure Lieutenant Willsden can give you something for that," returned Esterell. "By injection."

"He's allergic to needles too, sir," grinned Kinstrey.

"The officer in charge is Inspector Northolt, sir," reported Sergeant Leigh. "She says you can borrow the flitter for half an hour, and is it worth coming to watch us?"

"Give her my thanks, and tell her there might be the odd explosion," replied the Lieutenant.

"Sir!" Sergeant Leigh dropped his visor again.

"Who's getting blown up, sir?" Kinstrey asked suspiciously.

"I think that depends on how careful you two are," said Lieutenant Esterell. "But if you can get the equipment out of the loft for the usual attempts to trace it, we'll still have to do something about the unstable explosive in those mines. And the tangleweb, of course."

"Flitter's landing, sir," reported Sergeant Leigh.

"Right, let's get to it," said Lieutenant Esterell.

As Troopers Beddows and Kinstrey were preparing to dangle beneath the expressway patrol helicopter to examine the patch on the roof of the PSF hideaway, one of the three occupants of the helicopter strolled over to join Lieutenant Esterell. She was wearing riding breeches and riding boots. Her riot helmet carried a yellow, Traffic stripe. Sunlight flashed from the twin silver bars of a Senior Inspector on her epaulettes. "I'm Northolt," she told the lieutenant, extending her ungloved left hand.

"Esterell. Good of you to lend us your helicopter." They shook hands awkwardly, right hand to left. Officers of equivalent rank rarely bothered with salutes in the field.

"There's not much for it to do at the moment," smiled Inspector Northolt. "You seem to have attracted the traffic off the roads. And I used to be in your line of business. Until this happened." She glanced down at the black glove on her right hand. "Good job I'm left handed."

Esterell smiled a special smile of understanding. He too had once been left handed.

"Would the Inspector care for some coffee?" Corporal Garvin appeared with two mugs. He towered almost a head taller than the new arrival.

"Thank you, Corporal," smiled Northolt. "That smells like real coffee."

"It is, sir," the corporal assured her.

"Sir?" Sergeant Leigh marched up to the group, looking annoyed. "The holovid mob are trying to provoke Corporal Morgan into shooting someone. There's obviously not enough happening so they're trying to make their own news."

"So they can scream about us interfering with their freedom to broadcast?" said Esterell sourly. "All right. Get their chiefs together and explain what's going to happen. Tell them there's an explosion hazard, and if they approach closer than two hundred meters, I shall contact their insurance companies and get their field cover cancelled. Then I'll vid the HV unions and tell them their members are working without insurance. If that doesn't scare them into co-operating, I don't know what will."

"Sir!" The Sergeant hurried sway, fighting a grim smile.

The Traffic helicopter fluttered into the air and hovered twenty yards above the patch of roofing felt. A figure in green and brown camouflage dropped into view, dangling on what looked like a length of thin string. When his feet were within a yard of the roof, Trooper Kinstrey performed a series of contortions which left him upside down with his feet hooked around the monofilament cable. Several tense minutes passed, during which he examined the section of roofing felt with various instruments from the collection on his belt. The fact that Kinstrey was dangling the wrong way up seemed not to inconvenience him in the slightest.

Lieutenant Esterell judged that Inspector Northolt could follow the stream or jargon passing between the end of the winch line and Trooper Beddows in the helicopter. Esterell had long since given up trying to follow the Technical Section's strange language, which never seemed to be the same twice running. But for the fact that Northolt kept nodding in time with Troopers Jamieson and Dawson, who were sitting on a wall, watching Kinstrey through binoculars, Esterell would have been sure that Three Section talked nonsense deliberately to confuse outsiders.

He put the inspector's age at about twenty-eight, which he considered to be the ideal age for a woman. Northolt was not as attractive as twenty-eight-year-old Janet Willsden to his biased eyes, but he judged that she had more undeclared admirers.

Lieutenant Willsden's attempts to project a tough, unshakable exterior as part of her image of a completely dependable field medic had an off-putting effect on many men. Northolt, in contrast, with her lively brown eyes and her artificial hand aroused protective instincts. No matter the strength of the tide of equality of the sexes that swept out from progressive Ferron, it was always more shocking to see a young woman who had lost a limb in the service of her country.

Trooper Kinstrey seemed satisfied that the area of roofing felt was clear of booby traps and pulled a knife from the sheath on his belt. The patch slithered down the roof, driven by the helicopter's rotor wash, and flapped into the back garden. Kinstrey disappeared into the hole. Several minutes ticked away, then the cable wriggled and went slack. Trooper Beddows slid down to join him. The helicopter moved away, retreating to a safe distance and treating part of the crowd and a holovision unit to a dust bath. Once the main attraction had moved into an interval, Lieutenant Esterell noticed that he seemed to be claiming the intermittent attention of his men.

They're as bad as the proverbial old maids for gossiping, he thought. Asking each other if Slasher Jenny knows Old Iron Fist is chatting a dazzler from Traffic. Poor old Jan. Stuck behind a mass of files, trying to catch up. Who'd be a medic? They seem to have to deal with about five times the paperwork.

"No problems about getting the gear out, sir," reported Corporal Dolan from Three Section's van.

Lieutenant Esterell chinned his communications switch. "Carry on, Corporal. Carefully."

The helicopter made six short trips from the house to a piece of open ground a safe distance away, dangling first wooden crates, then a plastic coffin, and finally two troopers.

"That's it for today," Esterell remarked to Northolt. "I take it Three Section didn't manage to baffle you?"

"Not quite," smiled the Inspector. "I've been out of it for a year now. All but a couple of weeks. Surprising how it comes back."

"It must be quite a contrast, Traffic after Special Service."

"I had no choice. *Damaged Psychological Profile*, the medical report said. I think they expected me to suicide," Northolt added bitterly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to dig it up again."

Northolt detected sincere regret. Esterell was not merely making comforting noises. She managed a smile. "I'll have us both in tears in a minute. And I don't suppose I'm telling you anything new." She glanced down at Esterell's gloved left hand.

"Unfortunately." Esterell removed his riot helmet, noting with a grin the reaction in Northolt's eyes when she saw his black-streaked snowy hair, which looked thirty years older than his face. "Who says the job doesn't drive you grey with worry?" he said with a smile. "Shall we inspect the spoils?"

"At least your hair hasn't dropped out," Northolt remarked lightly, removing her own helmet. Her hair was short and very black, combed forward into a fringe and framing a delicate face and small, neat ears.

Esterell handed the empty mugs to Corporal Garvin. They slid over the garden wall and followed an overgrown path to the road. After an automatic check for traffic, they crossed over and continued down the side of the house opposite. A collection of arms and ammunition was being displayed on two green plastic ground-sheets among the weeds. The walnut-textured plastic coffin could be seen, under guard, in the neighbouring garden. Corporal Dolan and Three Section were huddled around a set of mid-grey shoe boxes.

"The news-fiends would like some pictures, sir," said Sergeant Leigh,

casting covetous glances at a pearl-handled Sternway automatic pistol.

"Small numbers, not the whole mob at once," said Esterell.

"Otherwise things will disappear," nodded the Sergeant. "We have a fair mixture of arms, sir. All for point three-five calibre ammunition. There's a fair supply of that too."

"Weapons ancient and modern," agreed Esterell. "The old ones for their NeoKirlans and these for their own use." He picked up one of the compact sub-machine guns. "I've never seen so many of these together before. They're Zinders. Produce of Heitain. What do you have, Corporal?"

"A rather conventional selection of detonators, triggers and timers, sir," replied Corporal Dolan. "The explosive's in pretty bad condition. About all it's fit for is blowing up. I shouldn't cough near it."

"Saves us the demolition charges," commented Esterell.

"Yes, sir," agreed Dolan. "We found a passive network in the loft. A Ferran job, from the looks of it. I've never seen anything quite like it before, sir."

"Retrievable?"

"Oh, yes, sir. They'd left clear instructions for switching it off. They were probably as scared of it themselves as we were. No problems about disarming it and packing it up."

"It should give the lab boys something to play with," said Esterell. "Ever come across anything like it?" he added to Inspector Northolt.

"Only a copy of a Ferran report on them," she replied. "They're using then quite a lot as anti-intruder devices on government installations. Either to give a warning, or to set off things like optical flares to blind the intruder. And worse."

"A report in circulation?" asked Esterell.

"I'm afraid not. There's some admin jamble holding it up. I don't think the Intelligence people want the Ferrans to know we have it. Do you know Neil Stevens of Two Troop?"

"Big bloke with a ginger moustache?" asked Corporal Dolan. "Sir," he added as an after-thought.

"That's him," smiled Northolt. "He can let you have a copy."

"You must drop in on us more often," said Esterell. "You're wasted on Traffic."

"I hope to convince the mind-crankers of that at my next medical," smiled Northolt.

"I'm sure you'll succeed," said Esterell. "And I'll be sure to include your co-operation and the value of your information in my report."

"I'd be grateful if you did. Every little helps," said Northolt. "And a

good word from someone at the sharp end carries plenty of weight.”

“Glad to help,” said Esterell. “Right, Corporal. Prepare the house for demolition. A nice spectacular bang should keep the news-fiends happy for a few minutes.”

“Sir!” snapped Corporal Dolan. “Jamieson, Dawson.”

“A fiver says they blow themselves up,” Trooper Kinstrey remarked to Trooper Beddows in a very audible aside.

Corporal Dolan glared at them. Beddows nudged Kinstrey and nodded towards the canteen van. Looking as if they were on a mission of importance, the pair of them marched away.

“I think I’ll watch your explosion from the air,” decided Inspector Northolt, having inspected the captured arsenal.

“Thanks again for your help,” said Esterell.

“Pleasure,” smiled Northolt. “Anything to liven up a dull Sunday morning. Roll on the end of the shift, eh?”

They shook hands again, right to left. As Inspector Northolt lifted her riot helmet to her head, the sunlight caught her face in such a way as to highlight the tight shine of a patch of scar tissue beneath the right side of her jaw. A sudden depression swamped Lieutenant Esterell. *What*, he asked himself, *could be done about a society which allowed such terrible things to happen to its young women?*

“Sir?” Corporal Garvin’s voice at his elbow prevented his thoughts from descending too far into morbidity. “Chief Director on the vid for you, sir.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Senior Inspector Northolt smiled her attractive smile again and headed for the wasteland beyond the garden and her helicopter.

Lieutenant Esterell hurried to the control van. The videolink screen showed a square, uncompromising face that was full of lines and folds around a craggy nose and dark, direct eyes. Esterell delivered a rapid but thorough summary of the morning’s events.

“Well done, Richard,” beamed the Chief Director. The use of his first name told Esterell that he had indeed done well. “Only one non-fatal casualty and you could well have broken the back of the PSF in the area. And saved us a deal of trouble from the arms and explosives you scooped up.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Esterell with appropriate modestly. “I’ll pass that on to the Troop.”

“And a good bang for the holovision cameras,” continued the Chief Director. “A textbook operation. Three things to stress in your press statement – tell them about the tangleweb. The public have an absolute

horror of it since that film on the vid the other night. Don't dismiss the possibility of some brat wandering into a house like these and get caught up. Don't let them trick you into mentioning the PSF by name. But you can say this raid was made in connection with the attack on the reclamation centre at Losebridge on Friday. Sir Simon Lake has been asking some rather pointed questions about what we're doing about it. And lastly – stress the lack of casualties and show the newshounds some bullet holes outside the house. We don't want any false sympathy for the PSF. They were shooting at the police and they knew it. Make sure we can shout *foul* if they edit that message out of their recordings."

"Yes, sir," nodded Esterell, wishing that police work didn't have to be a constant struggle to obtain a fair deal from the unbiased holovision news services and pretty much a lost cause with the politically biased ones.

"And take a couple of newshounds into the house before you collect up the cartridge cases.. I'd be enormously pleased if one of them slipped and broke a leg to underline how much lead was flying at you. I'll see you at the debriefing."

"Yes, sir," said Esterell as the videolink screen swirled into a mirror. The unenthusiastic expression of his reflection became a faint grin of self mockery.

Oh, the horrors still to come, he thought. Debriefing and the inevitable bockan report to write. Not to mention the press release. Still, there's the afternoon and Janet to look forward to.

The stone house collapsed into a cloud of grey dust in a most satisfactory manner. Some of the spectators felt rather cheated at not seeing the fireball that holovision programs had taught them to associate with an explosion, but they cheered none the less. By way of an encore, Corporal Dolan detonated the rest of the explosives on the plain to the north of the hamlet.

Senior Inspector Northolt sent her congratulations on an efficient demolition job, then resumed her patrol of the area's roads and expressways, which included spotting brush and forest fires as well as traffic congestion and accidents. Lieutenant Esterell began to regret not having invited her to press the button of the exploder. He felt sure that Three Section would have approved the gesture.

Trooper Kinstrey's watch was reading 08:09 when eight dark green *Metro* vans came to a halt in the yard behind the main police station at Ulver. The rest of the country was in the process of coming to Sunday life. For most of Troop 42, the remainder of the day would be their own

after a debriefing session, a second breakfast and the inevitable checks on their equipment. Corporal Johns and Two Section were on stand-by duty. And there would be an extended duty bonus for all.

18. *Dungard Bound*

Devrel Sovershend was feeling half naked when he met Jules Sandford alias Sandy. The digital clocks at Landitch Station were showing 16:05. Sovershend's right arm felt unusually light and free without the familiar slight drag of a sleeve gun. But no sane person attempted to take a firearm aboard an aircraft. Not when detection was inevitable and the penalty for a first offence began at three months' imprisonment and a hefty fine, to which could be added a severe beating by law-abiding passengers outraged by an unnecessary delay. Sovershend's gun was locked safely in his case, which was wearing a transit sleeve that was coded for Dungard South International Airport.

Sandy decided that he too would have his leather overnight bag examined at the ticket centre. Having discovered a legal weapon in Sovershend's case, the baggage inspector spent twice the usual time scanning Sandy's. He seemed reluctant to believe that Sovershend's travelling companion was unarmed. Sandy could only fume impotently at the extended violation of his belongings. It was not unknown for an inspector to disregard the electronic systems and make a visual examination of the interior of alarm clocks and toothpaste tubes out of sheer spite. Sandy was reluctant to upset the inspector in case that happened to him.

At last, a humming noise burst from the sleeving machine and Sandy's travelling bag emerged, encased in a blue and white plastic sleeve, which would trigger an electronic scream if it were removed before reaching its coded destination. Automatic baggage handling equipment would refuse to touch the case, making human action necessary. The system had a twofold purpose – to deter thefts from passengers' luggage by airport staff and to cut down on delays at the airport by eliminating the need for luggage scans in the routine anti-hi-jack precautions.

Sandy disappeared behind a news sheet as soon as he was seated comfortably on the train. Sovershend realized that he would have to provide his own entertainment during the journey. Not being in a reading mood, he swallowed a *travel green* and spent the time staring at stress patterns in the window through polarized shades.

Sovershend and Sandy drew envious stares from the queue at the baggage counter when they collected their boarding passes. About half

a dozen last-minute panickers were waiting to have their luggage scanned and sleeved, and the scanner was acting up. Envy became puzzlement when they noticed that Sovershend's travel sleeve was striped red and white when the usual colours were blue and white. But those permitted to carry firearms still formed a very small minority.

Sandy seemed intent on trying to work his way through every Sunday news sheet in the world. As a travelling companion, he was about as interesting as a block of fresh concrete. After steering Sandy to the departure lounge for an inevitable wait, Sovershend bought a couple of pints of fort-beer and retired behind a paperback bought from the dispenser by the door.

Eventually, their flight was called.

"What?" Sandy looked up with an expression of slight annoyance when Sovershend tugged at his sleeve.

"They've just called our flight," he repeated.

"At last." Sandy disowned the news sheets on his right. He had scanned that pile. "Come on, then."

"Sobok," Sovershend muttered under his breath, damping down the fires of resentment banked by Sandy's casual arrogance. "It's this way," he added when his companion aimed himself towards the exit to the inspection hall.

They ran into a traffic jam in the flight control section, just before the covered glideway from pier to aircraft. A metal detector had taken a violent dislike to what a would-be passenger insisted was just a pocket knife, used only for sharpening pencils. The weapon, which featured a laser-sharp five inch blade that flew from the handle at the touch of a pressure pad, was confiscated for the duration of the flight amid hostile rumblings from the rest of the queue. Other passengers had already surrendered two pairs of scissors, a corkscrew and a handful of anti-rape gas bombs.

Then routine took over. Uniforms with empty smiles guided their charges to seats. The aircraft taxied out onto a sun-baked runway. Despite the fears of a number of the passengers, it managed to loft effortlessly into the blue afternoon sky. Within minutes of take off, a beefy steward served Sovershend and Sandy with late afternoon tea and cakes. They became the object of resentful glares from neighbours who had opted for a more economical flight. Sandy consumed his snack with one eye on a news sheet in Belldan. Sovershend buried himself in his book and ignored him.

20. *A Hazard Of The Trade*

Trouble! Alex Cardinal sensed that all was not well when he reached the side door of the pub. Thirty or so youngsters were clustered in the car park, enjoying the warmth of a pleasant evening in the middle of the year and escaping the smoky atmosphere indoors. Most of them were wearing the spidery *E* badge of the *enselganger* – some to show that they had formed a stable relationship and perverse others to show that they were free, unattached and available.

Cardinal worked his way through the crowd. Nobody seemed unduly interested in him, but there was an itch between his shoulder blades – a warning that he had learned to trust.

A young man in a green-biased flame shirt detached himself from a group of similarly attired twenty-year-olds and drifted between the cars, his attention apparently elsewhere but moving towards Cardinal. Pausing to light a slim cigar, the investigator glanced to left and right.

There were two men on the left – the twenty-year-old with a beehive of dark hair had been joined by a man of about forty, who was hanging on to every last strand of his pale hair. Both were looking directly towards Cardinal.

Time to be gone, Cardinal thought, dropping his cigar. He bent forward as if to pick it up. Crouching, he started for the shelter of his car. A soft but penetrating whistle whooped from his right. Something moved just beyond the bonnet of his car. Cardinal altered course, muttering a curse.

What have you got yourself into, lad? he thought, tugging his Noiseless from its waist holster.

"Put the gun down and keep going," said a hard voice from behind him.

Cardinal glanced over his shoulder to make sure that he was not being bluffed, then placed the Noiseless carefully on the grey tarmac and took two more steps. When he turned, the youth in the flame shirt was tucking the weapon into his waistband. The small automatic pistol aimed at Cardinal was almost lost in a grimy hand.

"Do I put my hands up, or what?" Cardinal asked.

"Just keep them where I can see them, dad," returned the youth, a crooked grin twisting his mouth.

"I don't have much money on me," remarked Cardinal, introducing a nervous quaver into his voice. It was not one hundred per cent acting. He had been threatened seriously with a firearm twice before. The internal numbing emptiness remained just as shocking despite his

previous experience. He felt as though he were one half-step away from the edge of a crumbling cliff and a long drop.

"Don't waste our time." The new voice came from behind Cardinal. The unidentified gunmen seemed to enjoy creeping up on people.

"What do you want, then?" Cardinal turned his head to meet the empty, grey eyes set in the seamed face of a third man.

"We're going for a short drive. Then you're going to tell us why you've been asking questions about our friends." Thin, pale lips formed emotionless words with a minimum of movement. The man did not have to resort to threats to tell Cardinal how much trouble he was in. "The van's this way."

"Where are we going?" stalled Cardinal.

Two guns were aimed at him – one at either end of a yard-wide corridor between the parked cars. Cardinal knew that he could draw his sleeve gun and put the older man down before he could react. The flame-shirted youngster, he decided, might freeze, or he might get off one shot from his .30 calibre pistol – which could be fatal, or not. Cardinal had no choice but to find out.

The two men had to be members of the Popular Socialist Front who believed Cardinal to be an undercover policeman. When they found out that he was a private investigator, the van ride would become strictly one-way.

"You'll find out where we're going soon enough," said the older man impatiently, making a flicking motion with his gun. "Come on."

"You can't shoot me here. Not with all these people around," stalled Cardinal. He brought his left hand up to scratch his nose. When it reached waist level on the way down, he intended to shoot.

An almost deferential snapping sound checked his hand. Cardinal saw a purple glow strike a well-worn safari jacket and merge with the light blue fabric. He spun on his left heel, needle gun flicking into his left hand. The youth in the flame shirt was sliding to the ground, a look of utter astonishment frozen on his pale face, his automatic pistol pointing towards his own right foot.

"Welcome to Operation Mousetrap," grinned Major Rufus Tarpigan, bobbing out from behind a sheltering car. "Right, lads. Clear them up."

Three men appeared carrying Boulton riot guns. They dragged their unconscious victims over to a grey van rapidly and unobtrusively. Cardinal retrieved his Noiseless before it too could disappear. Uncertain eyes at the pub turned towards the moving figures. Nobody seemed quite sure what had happened, but some nosy person was bound to stroll over to investigate if given enough time.

"Hello, Rufus." Cardinal managed an air of composure. "I'd appreciate a warning next time you pull a stunt like that. Otherwise I'll send you the bill for the underwear."

"Stick it on your client's bill," returned Tarpigan negligently. "I'm sure Sir Nigel wouldn't dream of questioning a legitimate business expense. Right, I think we'd better evaporate before the locals start wandering over here."

"I wonder if someone spotted what was happening and called the Prots?" remarked Cardinal.

"Sheer coincidence," scoffed Tarpigan, completely unmoved by the sound of a distant siren screaming towards them. "If you're going into town, you can give me a lift. Our mutual employer wants a report in person."

"That's my next stop," admitted Cardinal.

He led the way to his car, fighting against feelings of uneasiness. Recent events indicated that the major was taking the law into his own hands, that he was dealing out summary justice to prominent members of the PSF, against whom there was insufficient evidence to justify an arrest.

As a licensed private investigator, Cardinal was bound to work within the confines of the law. Were he to become involved in irregular activities, he risked the loss of his investigator's licence and the privilege of carrying firearms for the protection of himself and clients. He also risked the loss of the goodwill of his police contacts and, perhaps, his own liberty for a number of years.

But the events of the last few minutes underlined the fact that nobody else was playing by society's rules. Alex Cardinal was part of the game whether or not he wished to play. If the PSF knew about him, sheer survival demanded that he either got on with the job or got out of the country. And if he stayed, it would be a good idea to keep an eye out for the squad of PSF enforcers next time he asked a few questions. Major Tarpigan and his cover squad could arrive on the scene a fraction of a second too late the next time. A round from a needle gun took just one thousandth of a second to travel a distance of one yard.

Taking everything into consideration, Cardinal decided to jump his client two steps on his scale of charges. If his life was in danger, then *Class Six* charges were called for. And if Sir Nigel Grantby was unwilling to pay them, then Cardinal would be justified in withdrawing speedily from the case.

Resolving to be much more cautious in future, Cardinal unlocked his car. A tall Centraller, black as boot polish and with eyes of brown in

yellow, drifted over to join them.

"Captain Sam Smith," said the mercenary as an introduction. "He was directing your cover squad."

"In that case, pleased to meet you," said Cardinal. He received a firm squeeze when he extended his hand to Smith, who had a thoughtful manner and a distinct Norlish accent when he spoke Ferran.

"We'll get something to eat on the way," Tarpigan decided.

"I'll let you drive," said Cardinal, surrendering his keys.

"Still feeling a bit rocky, Alex?" grinned Tarpigan.

"I think I've got pretty good reason to be, don't you?" replied Cardinal evenly. "You know what they had in mind for me, of course? And what I had to do?"

"You were going to take on both of them," remarked Captain Smith from the back seat. "And take a chance the man behind you didn't hit anything immediately fatal. You're a very brave man, Alex."

"No, not brave," countered Cardinal. "Just scared and bockan desperate."

"But you're still alive to tell the tale, and that's all that matters," added Tarpigan. "You're a survivor, Alex. Remind me to issue you with a set of lightweight body armour to make sure you keep it up."

"I could have done with that five minutes ago," Cardinal pointed out.

"It's only just taken a walk from a Ferran Government Testing Centre," chuckled Captain Smith. "It won't be here till tonight."

21. Sovershend And Sandy In Dungard.

Sunday flights had a reputation for lateness. Thanks to the splendid credit rating of the card found in his flat, Sandy and Sovershend were spared further delay when they reached their destination. When he stepped off the glideway at the baggage counter, a sometime blonde with large, appealing brown eyes retrieved Sovershend's travelling bag from an armoured locker and stripped off the transit sleeve. Sandy's bag arrived with the rest of the uncommon luggage on the carousel, but with the vanguard.

Sovershend piloted Sandy along a cool plastic tube to the enclosed terminal of the Overground/Underground system. A bored inspector in an armour-glass box glanced briefly at their tickets, then returned to the slideball match on a portable videolink. As soon as they were seated on the train, Sandy disappeared behind a West Heitainan news sheet, underlining the fact that he could read Belldan.

The acceleration gong sounded. Then the backs of their seats crept

away from them. Sandy lost control of his news sheet and produced a fine string of muttered curses. Sovershend failed to recognise the words, but they sounded Belldan.

Just over a minute later, the first station flashed past. They were on an express. All of the lights came on at Cavener Road, when the train dived underground for the final part of the journey. The duorail system of the suburban overground section continued in the city-centre underground section – an arrangement designed for passenger safety. Anyone who fell or was pushed from a platform was in no danger from live rails and there was a generous clearance should a train arrive immediately. Seven and a half minutes after starting its journey, the O/U train came to a halt beneath Priadon railway station.

“This way,” said Sovershend, guiding Sandy to the tunnel leading to the Centre-Circle line. But instead of boarding the waiting train, he made for a bench on the platform.

“What’s happening?” asked Sandy, looking puzzled and a little suspicious.

“We’re meeting someone here,” Sovershend explained.

The train screamed away, leaving a partial vacuum to hug at them playfully. A youngish, emaciated man sidled up to them ten minutes later. Sandy was just about to tell him that he was not carrying any loose change when he noted that the newcomer’s coverall was in fashion, new and not designed for hard wear.

“This is Chas Jones,” Sovershend told Sandy.

“We’re not going to discuss anything here, are we?” Sandy returned warily.

“Oh, not all,” Jones assured him in a husky voice with overtones of a Norton accent, which was scarcely distinguishable from the cross-border accent of the southern counties of Norland. “We’ll do that when we get to the hotel. Ah, here it comes.”

The next westbound train arrived. It was a cylinder fitted with double seats set at right-angles to a central aisle, all facing forward. There was a guard in a small compartment between the two coaches. The Dungard O/U system was a private enterprise operation. Routine vandalism could not be shrugged off onto local taxes and it was therefore discouraged actively by arming the guard with a Boulton riot gun.

Descending acceleration became almost immediate ascending deceleration. The train chattered to a halt at Mitton Gardens. Drawing envious stares from those on the platform, Sovershend led his party across to the tunnel route to the Mitton Gardens Hotel.

A revolving door let them into a rather stark vault. Walls of frigid,

polar blue linked a white ceiling and a speckled carpet in solid black and deep-sea blue. There was a long counter on the left, topped by a slab of sapphire blue plastic, which was also the colour of the guard's uniform. The four by five yard area reminded Sovershend of a blue customs hall.

He opened his bag and surrendered his sleeve gun. Anybody, other than a police officer, who took a weapon into one of the better hotels was expected to leave it in the entry area. Failure to obey the rules resulted in instant ejection and membership of a widely-circulated black list. A minion arrived to take charge of the baggage. He conducted the guests through a double-doored security filter to the lobby. There were no body searches, but the entry area was fitted with a comprehensive selection of metal and explosives detectors.

Sovershend and Sandy were expected, but it took a few minutes to register Jones as a *Class 2* (non-resident) guest. He received a discreet silver disc, the size of a £1 coin, which he attached to the projecting cuff of his bronze-fibre pullover. His hosts received slightly larger gold discs. They followed the minion up to a pair of linked suites on the fourth floor. Their lift had two speeds – dead slow and stop.

"I thought you said there'd be two people for us to meet?" Sandy called through the connecting door as he unpacked.

"That's right. But the meeting's tomorrow, remember?" Sovershend replied.

"In that case, where does he fit into things?"

Sovershend turned to find Sandy in the doorway, pointing at Jones, who was sprawled comfortably in a lounge, surrounding a stak of fortheer.

"He's a sort of welcoming committee," said Sovershend. "And he's here to get details. I didn't go into specifics on the vid." Sovershend decided not to mention that all of the facts had not been in his possession at the time, or that Jones enjoyed a visit to the city's better hotels, if only for a drink at someone else's expense.

"I see," said Sandy, giving grudging approval. "We seem to have rather a lot of middle men in on this deal. The more links, the weaker the chain."

"We wouldn't be here if they weren't dependable," Sovershend pointed out. "Anyway, Chas is in charge till the other two get back tonight, so we have to deal with him."

"Ah!" said Sandy, responding slightly to Jones' smile of contentment when he learned that he was dealing with a partner, not an underling. "I suppose you'd better tell him what he has to know." He flopped into

the other lounge and chose a pint stak of fortbeer from the selection in the chillbox below a small table.

The videolink picked that moment to start chiming. Sovershend glanced at it but made no move to respond to the call.

"I don't want to rush you," said Jones mildly, "but I'm supposed to be meeting Alison in about twenty minutes."

"All right." Sovershend was willing to ignore the videolink. No one important knew where he was. "The story is . . ."

"I'll tell him," interrupted Sandy. "You go and answer that svozhnar zakh. I find there's nothing more irritating than an unanswered vid, don't you?" he added to Jones, who just shrugged to indicate that he could turn a deaf ear with the best of them.

Sovershend went into the bedroom to answer the videolink, expecting it to stop chiming as soon as his hand was within range of the ACC key. Surprisingly, a projection formed, showing him an unfamiliar face.

"Vreitar Sovershend, Citizen ID Card number 8S-B2-70855?" asked a stern man in a dark uniform, making a statement out of the question.

"That's right," nodded Sovershend, wondering what the police wanted with him. The immobility of the face in the screen made very difficult an assessment of the thoughts behind the level green eyes. A lack of visible insignia on his dark blue uniform and the plain, pastel green wall behind him gave the policeman a menacing lack of definable status. There was only a vision of close-cropped, iron grey hair surrounding a bulging forehead, challenging eyes, a blade of a nose, a tight mouth and a pointed chin.

Sovershend decided that the pause between his admission of his identity and the Prot's next statement was designed to prod at his conscience and work loose feelings of guilt for display on his face. As his conscience had long since withered away from lack of use, the pause extended.

"Did you want something?" Sovershend asked as the policeman started to part his thin lips.

"Please place your ID card in the slot and place your right thumb on the panel for verification," said the policeman, a shadow of annoyance flickering across his face.

Sovershend obeyed the instructions with an aimless smile. A momentary tightening of his mouth was the policeman's way of expressing his disappointment when a computer file told him that the card was genuine and in the possession of its lawful owner. His cool, green eyes lifted from an overlay across the bottom of the policeman's

screen. They met the base of the stak of fortbeer that Sovershend had just tilted to get at the last few drops.

"Just a routine check, sir," said the policeman. "Concerning a report made by a CSP Auxiliary the day before yesterday in the Walton South district of Leviton. Could you give me a summary of what happened?"

The policeman extracted a detailed account of Sovershend's adventure with an armed Robin on Walton Parade.

"Thank you, sir," he said at last. "The individual concerned has pleaded guilty to the offence, so you will not be required to attend the hearing. Your statement has been recorded and we need your authorization to give it in evidence if required."

Sovershend shrugged, indifferent to the fate of a Robin. "If you like."

"Thank you, sir. Good evening." The videolink screen turned an opalescent grey, then became a mirror again.

"Here he is," said Sandy when Sovershend emerged from the bedroom in search of more fortbeer. "You're just in time to show Vr. Jones out. I think we've covered everything." Jones placed an empty stak on the table and slid a reserve supply into the pockets of his coverall. Sandy responded to his farewell with an elegant wave of his hand, turning to the videolink to key up the evening dinner menu. His thoughts were on higher things.

"Where and when tomorrow?" asked Sovershend in the descending lift.

"I'm meeting you at the O/U station here at half-ten tomorrow morning. Bit of a rum sobok, your maccar. You have to drag everything out of him," Jones added.

"True," agreed Sovershend. "But there's a certain irresistible something about him."

"Such as what? His charming personality? Or his casual air of masculinity?"

"His what?" grinned Sovershend. "No, it's his money. He's got enough to drown in, from what I've seen."

"Just make sure you don't drown," warned Jones. "There's something about him."

"Is this your ESP giving you spirit messages from your borderland ancestors?" asked Sovershend, mimicking Jones' accent. "Or just envy for his air of casual masculinity?"

"You can laugh!" Jones pretended to be deeply offended.

"Thanks, I will," returned Sovershend. "Seriously, though. I know when to duck. And he *is* a bit too good to be true. I can see that. But he comes highly recommended. So I'm watching and waiting."

“Oh, well. All you can do is go with a recommendation.” Jones shrugged, leaving it at that.

22. Alex Cardinal And Major Tarpigan Report

After dining well and on expenses, Alex Cardinal, Major Rufus Tarpigan and Captain Smith made their way to the high-income residential area to the east of Leviton's Walton Park. Cardinal was feeling like a submariner who had survived his first depth-charge attack. His dangerous experience lay safely behind him and he felt able to face a similar predicament in the future with more confidence. It had come as a great relief to learn that the PSF squad had become interested in him not as a result of his own carelessness, but as part of Tarpigan's operation to flush the enemy out into the open.

The men who had attempted to kidnap him had known only that he had been asking questions about the PSF, and they had not been aware of his identity. Part Two of the operation was in progress as they approached Sir Nigel Grantby's residence.

The vehicle carrying the prisoners had been involved in a minor collision. Abandoning his still unconscious colleagues, the youngest PSF member had taken his chance to escape. Tarpigan was hoping that he would lead the mercenary's men to other members of the PSF cell. Cardinal had been careful not to ask about the fate of the two older men.

Their acquaintance was the product of six years' intermittent association, each having made use of the other's abilities in his chosen field. Alex Cardinal preferred to work as a security consultant. But when economic pressures forced him to don his investigator hat, he chose to work within the law because he remained convinced that people like Rufus Tarpigan were bound to come unstuck one day.

The major, in contrast, believed in getting the most out of life and letting the future look after itself. A mild infection of this attitude was responsible for Cardinal's decision to promote Sir Nigel Grantby two steps on his scale of charges instead of withdrawing from the case. As he had no dependents, a few risks taken for a proper reward seemed justified under the circumstances.

And the increased revenue would be a useful cushion in leaner times – as long as he exercised proper caution. He saw no point in earning money that he would not live to spend.

Chuckling at one of Captain Smith's collection of disgusting jokes, Cardinal turned into the entry filter at the entrance to the car park at Sir

Nigel Grantby's apartment building. Weapon snoopers chirped a song of alarm when the security guards scanned the car. The disembodied voice seemed ready for an argument when it informed Major Tarpigan that weapons were not to be taken into the building, assuming that he was the leader of the group. Then a burly figure in a dark green, almost-Special-Service uniform confirmed that the visitors had locked all of their firearms in the car.

"This is practically on your doorstep, isn't it?" Tarpigan remarked to Cardinal as the lift whisked them up to the ninth floor of the high security residential block.

"I'm only about two or three miles away," agreed Cardinal. "About a million socially, though."

"Your floor, vreitei," said the disembodied voice at the end of an upward sprint.

Double doors peeled apart smoothly. The trio found themselves in a chamber not much bigger than the eight-person lift. There was a heavy duty carpet on the floor of the same pattern as the lift's floor covering. Even the walls were the same warm, yellow, cushion plastic.

Sir Nigel Grantby opened the inner door of the entry porch and ushered his visitors along fifteen yards of picture-infested corridor. Another door placed between a couple of charcoal drawings opened to the left and into a large room which was partly study, partly lounge and partly workshop.

To the right of the door stood a solid, modern desk fitted with a videolink and the array of computer facilities expected in a modern office. A holowindow behind the desk showed Walton Park full of men in round hats, women in dark clothing and horse-drawn carriages.

Dark grey filing stores – paper, film and electronic – filled the corner on the left of the desk. The far corner of the room was uncarpeted, outfitted with an impressive workbench and the facilities of a small engineering business. Wooden-doored cupboards lined the walls to head height in that quarter of the room.

Cupboards gave way to glass-doored bookcases atop display cabinets where the carpet began. A splendid variety of bindings marched as far as a leisure-size videolink and a cocktail cabinet, which faced the desk. Seven swivelling chair upholstered in a hairy, dull yellow-and-black striped fabric were strewn the length of the left half of the room, dotted around three coffee tables with tops of smoked glass.

Grantby found Captain Smith disconcerting at first. But when he identified correctly each of the paintings in the room, Smith convinced the Refuse Baron that he was dealing with a cultured man and not some

freedom fighter who had learned weapon drill instead of reading and writing.

"Uisge all right?" asked Grantby, halting at the bar.

"Fine by us, Sir Nigel," nodded Tarpigan, continuing on down the room to crouch in front of the display cabinets. "These are good," he remarked, scanning an array of steam-powered models.

"My hobby," beamed Grantby, pouring generously. "There's thirty years of spare time there."

"Do they work?" Cardinal knelt in front of the locomotives.

"Oh, yes," nodded his host. "They're gas fired, of course, not coal. But otherwise exactly like the originals."

"I used to go to school by steam train," remarked Tarpigan. "For a couple of years. All the train spotters thought it was the end of the world when they started with the whole system electrification."

"I don't think I've ever seen a steam train in action," remarked Cardinal. "Apart from on the vid."

"You youngsters don't know what you've missed. Ah, thanks." Tarpigan accepted a drink and aimed one of the striped chairs at the middle table..

"You can see plenty of steam engines in my part of the world," remarked Smith. "Northern cast offs, mainly. Apart from the Ferrans developing their Advanced Coal-Fired Train."

"Not just the Ferrans," remarked Sir Nigel. "We have an interest in that project too. Anyway, gentlemen, your efforts have been more than satisfactory. There's been an almost tangible release of pressure. And Simon Lake was in raptures this morning about the success of the police raid in Losemoor National Park."

"That's the thing about terrorist organizations," said Tarpigan. "They think they've got a divine right to strike their blows for the cause. It tends to come as a devastating shock if the victim does more than scream in protest."

Cardinal wondered briefly what their employer would say if he found out that Tarpigan was going beyond supplying information to the police and striking secret blows of his own.

"What progress have you made on identifying the people hiding behind the PSF?" asked Grantby, cutting across the investigator's thoughts.

"A small amount," replied Cardinal, meaning precious little. "We have to tread pretty carefully."

"What he means," grinned Tarpigan, "is he nearly became heavier by a few grains of lead earlier this evening."

"You mean he was nearly killed?" asked Grantby, a large area of white appearing around his blue pupils.

"As near as I'd ever like to come," Cardinal admitted.

"I'm sorry, I've always assumed you were exaggerating the dangers you've mentioned," Grantby said awkwardly. "To build up your professional image."

"Well, the lad's still alive and drinking," laughed Tarpigan. "We're still trying to trace the history of captured weapons and equipment," he continued, coming back to business. "But they tend to be used as currency in certain circles. Counting weapons captured in raids on police stations abroad, sales by foreign police more corrupt than our own and raids on political opponents' armouries, the armaments of the average terrorist group tend to be an unholy mixture."

"That's about what the police said," nodded Grantby.

"But we're not completely beaten," Tarpigan added. "I don't know whether you watch the vid much, but an increasingly popular weapon for the bad guys is a Heitainan sub-machine gun called the *Zinder*, after the, quote, 'picturesque river-valley setting of the factory.' The first generation, the Z-100, didn't move too well. Which gives us more of a chance of tracing them. I have someone working on that."

"Hmmm, good," nodded Grantby. "Cardinal?"

"The PSF has three layers," said Cardinal. "The upper echelon, who make up a sort of respectable set of spokesmen, the rank and file, who do all the dirty work, and a group of middle men who really run the whole show. Our unknown opponents are supplying these middle men. The middle men tend to be rather elusive, but the ones we've caught up with have mentioned two blokes in a van. There seems to be some sort of trouble between the suppliers and the PSF middle men at the moment. Which is why they've been some help in putting together composite physical descriptions and identity pictures. I think the best way of summing up is to use the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle. We've got most of the straight edges assembled into a border, and we're starting to build up the centre to find out what the picture is."

"And what can I tell my colleagues?" asked Grantby.

"The pressure from the PSF will slacken quite significantly over the next few weeks as the police roll them up," said Tarpigan.

"But we can't count the threat as over until we identify whoever's supplying them with arms and advice," added Cardinal. "Your real enemies could quite easily dump the PSF and link up with a similar movement. Which would put us back to the beginning again."

"I see," nodded Grantby. "Cautious optimism?"

"That and beefing up your defences," agreed Tarpigan. "Did you know that's one of the PSF's aims? Forcing you to put your profits back into the pockets of the workers by making you spend more on security?"

"I have heard something along those lines," nodded Grantby. "But it doesn't make much sense. Instead of paying taxes to the exchequer to support public sector projects, and PSF members, any spending will be going to private security firms. And I can't see them having many PSF members on their books. Is there anything further, vreitei?"

"I think that covers it." Tarpigan exchanged glances with Cardinal and Captain Smith. "Are you in a hurry to throw us out, or can I have a closer look at your models?"

"Of course, yes," beamed Grantby. He heaved his large frame out of the swivel chair and headed for the cocktail cabinet to fetch the uisge decanter. Someone showing a genuine, rather than a forced, interest in his life's work was always guaranteed to put him in an excellent mood.

23. Ambush for Ambrose of Nottridge

A deferential buzzing noise attracted the attention of the Duke of Atmain. He turned from a glazed, cross-shaped firing slit and his contemplation of the lights of the provincial capital as seen from a distance of just over a mile and an elevation of sixty yards. The videolink on his functional-modern desk showed him a side view of the caller as picked up by the monitor camera in the corridor.

He touched a panel on the control unit with his left index finger. His right hand was fully occupied with his pipe. The door peeled open smoothly and silently, and the lights in his tower-top office brightened from a background glow. "Well, Ashley?" asked the Duke eagerly.

"His answer is still no, sir. He refused to co-operate," replied the tall blonde woman. She was highly attractive in a predatory sort of way, physically fit and in her middle twenties – exactly half the duke's age.

"Just what I expected," nodded the Duke, sinking into the well-padded chair behind his desk. "Drink?"

Ashley padded over to the bar and mixed orange liqueur, chinchon water and lemon juice. She brought the drinks over to the desk and perched on the edge of a black plastic and steel office chair.

"I think we're going to have to teach him a severe lesson, sir," she announced. "Vreitar Ambrose Mellbury of Nottridge is too sure of himself."

"What about warning him of the ambush Demirell set up for his

second in command, Bekker? Wouldn't that prove the value of our partnership?"

"No, sir. And Demirell agrees."

"I'd reached much the same conclusion," nodded the Duke.

"We thought a few indiscreet words dropped in official ears would be appropriate," Ashley said with a malignant smirk.

"Agreed." The Duke held out his glass for a refill.

Ashley had barely tasted her own drink but she returned to the bar immediately with both glasses. A deep tan, which made her hair seem even paler in contrast, disappeared intriguingly into her dark green uniform. A single glance was sufficient to motivate most men to find out whether the tanned areas met in the middle. The first contact with her ice-blue eyes generally dispelled the ambition. Ashley picked her own company.

"While you're in Camerland," the Duke continued to her back, "you can collect Demirell's special reports. Should save him time hopping backwards and forwards across the Straits. I'm sure he has better things to do."

"Yes, sir." Ashley returned the Duke's refilled glass, smiling inwardly at Demirell's reaction to missing a trip home. Ashley was not one of his admirers and Demirell had a tendency to treat her as a servant if she failed to assert herself.

"Take Hudson with you," added the Duke. "I think she's about ready to see the other side of the Straits."

"Yes, sir. Her personality profile suggests she's not yet achieving her full potential here. I think she needs a good push to get her started."

"You make her sound like a car with a flat battery," laughed the Duke. "Come to think of it, flat is the last thing you'd call Hudson."

Ashley smiled dutifully.

"When do you expect to hear again from your contact in Mellbury's organization? From what's his name? Rideau?"

"Rivaud, sir. Armand Rivaud. We have no further contacts planned unless Mellbury changes any of his plans. It makes for better security."

The Duke nodded wisely. "One final point: if the Camerlish Customs intercept Mellbury's shipment, there should be some sort of reward. It's to be paid in Dungard, to someone who answers this fellow Sovershend's description."

"We can pick it up at the same time as the reward for turning Bekker over to the CustEx, sir." Ashley drained her glass to indicate that her report had been concluded.

"Keep up the good work," smiled the Duke. "Good night."

“Good night, sir.” Ashley exited efficiently.

When he was alone again, Norman Chatelle dimmed the lights and returned to the tapered padding in the firing slit. Very soon, the night view from his study window would be of the lights of a Camerlish city. The thought made him realize that he had better warn Westwood, the commander of the castle guard, that he would be losing another of his staff.

Ashley’s abrupt transfer a week earlier had upset his routines out of all proportion and the Duke wanted to avoid another lecture from his security executive on the subject of manpower planning. Herta Dortmann annoyed could be five times as intimidating as Gail Ashley at her haughtiest.

End of Part 1

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