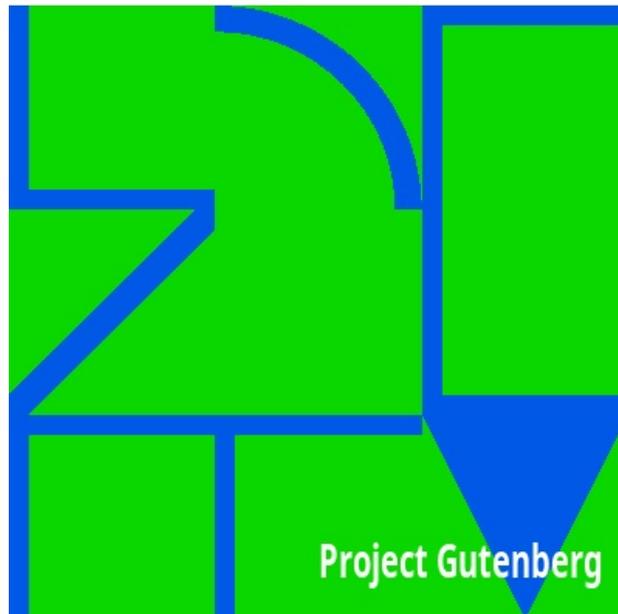

Lion Loose

James H. Schmitz



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LION LOOSE

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ

*The most dangerous of animals is not the biggest and fiercest—
but the one that's hardest to stop. Add intelligence to that ... and
you may come to a wrong conclusion as to what the worst
menace is....*

Illustrated by Schoenherr

F

or twelve years at a point where three major shipping routes of the Federation of the Hub crossed within a few hours' flight of one another, the Seventh Star Hotel had floated in space, a great golden sphere, gleaming softly in the void through its translucent shells of battle plastic. The Star had been designed to be much more than a convenient transfer station for travelers and freight; for some years after it was opened to the public, it retained a high rating among the more exotic pleasure resorts of the Hub. The Seventh Star Hotel was the place to have been that season, and the celebrities and fat cats converged on it with their pals and hangers-on. The Star blazed with life, excitement, interstellar scandals, tinkled with streams of credits dancing in from a thousand worlds. In short, it had started out as a paying proposition.

But gradually things changed. The Star's entertainment remained as delightfully outrageous as ever, the cuisine as excellent; the accommodations and service were still above reproach. The fleecing, in general, became no less expertly painless. But one had *been* there. By its eighth year, the Star was dated. Now, in its twelfth, it lived soberly off the liner and freighter trade, four fifths of the guest suites shut down, the remainder irregularly occupied between ship departures.

And in another seven hours, if the plans of certain men went through, the Seventh Star Hotel would abruptly wink out of existence.

Some fifty or sixty early diners were scattered about the tables on the garden terraces of Phalagon House, the Seventh Star Hotel's most exclusive eatery. One of them had just finished his meal, sat smoking and regarding a spiraling flow of exquisitely indicated female figures across the garden's skyscape with an air of friendly approval. He was a large and muscular young man, deeply tanned, with shoulders of impressive thickness, an aquiline nose, and dark, reflective eyes.

After a minute or two, he yawned comfortably, put out the cigarette, and pushed his chair back from the table. As he came to his feet, there was a soft bell-note from the table ComWeb. He hesitated, said, "Go ahead."

"Is intrusion permitted?" the ComWeb inquired.

"Depends," the guest said. "Who's calling?"

"The name is Reetal Destone."

He grinned, appeared pleasantly surprised. "Put the lady through."

There was a brief silence. Then a woman's voice inquired softly, "Quillan?"

"Right here, doll! Where—"

"Seal the ComWeb, Quillan."

He reached down to the instrument, tapped the seal button, said, "All right. We're private."

"Probably," the woman's voice said. "But better scramble this, too. I want to be very sure no one's listening."

Quillan grunted, slid his left hand into an inner coat pocket, briefly fingered a device of the approximate size and shape of a cigarette, drew his hand out again. "Scrambling!" he announced.

"Now, what—"

"Mayday, Quillan," the soft voice said. "Can you come immediately?"

Quillan's face went expressionless. "Of course. Is it urgent?"

"I'm in no present danger. But we'd better waste no time."

"Is it going to take real hardware? I'm carrying a finger gun at the moment."

"Then go to your rooms and pick up something useful," Reetal said. "This should take real hardware, all right."

"All right. Then where do I go?"

"I'll meet you at your door. I know where it is."

When Quillan arrived, she was standing before the door to his suite, a tall blonde in a sleeveless black and gold sheath; a beautiful body, a warm, lovely, humorous face. The warmth and humor were real, but masked a mind as impersonally efficient as a computer, and a taste for high and dangerous living. When Quillan had last met Reetal Destone, a year and a half before, the taste was being satisfied in industrial espionage. He hadn't heard of her activities since then.

She smiled thoughtfully at him as he came up. "I'll wait outside," she said. "We're not talking here."

Quillan nodded, went on into his living room, selected a gun belt and holstered gun from a suitcase, fastened the belt around his waist under the coat, and came out. "Now what?"

"First a little portal-hopping—"

He followed her across the corridor and into a tube portal, watched as she tapped out a setting. The exit light flashed a moment later; they stepped out into a vacant lounge elsewhere in the same building, crossed it, entered another portal. After three more shifts, they emerged into a long hall, dimly lit, heavily carpeted. There was no one in sight.

"Last stop," Reetal said. She glanced up at his face. "We're on the other side of the Star now, in one of the sections they've closed up. I've established a kind of emergency headquarters here. The Star's nearly broke, did you know?"

"I'd heard of it."

"That appears to be part of the reason for what's going on."

Quillan said, "What's going on?"

Reetal slid her arm through his, said, "Come on. That's my, hm-m-m, unregistered suite over there. Big boy, it's very, very selfish of me, but I was extremely glad to detect your name on the list of newly arrived guests just now! As to what's going on ... the *Camelot* berths here at midnight, you know."

Quillan nodded. "I've some business with one of her passengers."

Reetal bent to unlock the entrance door to the indicated suite. "The way it looks now," she remarked, "the odds are pretty high that you're not going to keep that appointment."

"Why not?"

"Because shortly after the *Camelot* docks and something's been unloaded from her, the *Camelot* and the Seventh Star Hotel are scheduled to go *poof!* together. Along with you, me, and some twelve thousand other people. And, so far, I haven't been able to think of a good way to keep it from happening."

Quillan was silent a moment. "Who's scheduling the poof?" he asked.

"Some old acquaintances of ours are among them. Come on in. What they're doing comes under the heading of destroying the evidence."

She locked the door behind them, said, "Just a moment," went over to the paneled wall, turned down a tiny silver switch. "Room portal," she said, nodding at the wall. "It might come in handy. I keep it turned off most of the time."

"Why are you turning it on now?" Quillan asked.

"One of the Star's stewards is working on this with me. He'll be along as soon as he can get away. Now I'll give you the whole thing as briefly as I can. The old acquaintances I mentioned are some boys of the Brotherhood of Beldon. Movaine's here; he's got Marras Cooms and Fluel with him, and around thirty of the Brotherhood's top guns. Nome Lancion's coming in on the *Camelot* in person tonight to take charge. Obviously, with all that brass on the job, they're after something very big. Just what it is, I don't yet know. I've got one clue, but a rather puzzling one. Tell you about that later. Do you know Velladon?"

"The commodore here?" Quillan nodded. "I've never met him but I know who he is."

Reetal said, "He's been manager of the Seventh Star Hotel for the past nine years. He's involved in the Beldon outfit's operation. So is the chief of the Star's private security force—his name's Ryter—and half a dozen other Star executives. They've got plenty of firepower, too; close to half the entire security force, I understand, including all the officers. That would come to nearly seventy men. There's reason to believe the rest of the force was disarmed and murdered by them in the subspace section of the Star about twelve hours ago. They haven't been seen since then.

"Now, Velladon, aside from his share in whatever they're after, has another reason for wanting to wipe out the Star in an unexplained blowup. There I have definite information. Did you know the Mooley brothers owned the Star?"

"Yes."

"I've been working for the Mooleys the past eight months," Reetal said, "checking up on employees at Velladon's level for indications of graft. And it appears the commodore had been robbing them blind here for at least several years."

"Sort of risky thing to try with the Mooleys, from what I hear," Quillan remarked.

"Yes. Very. Velladon had reason to be getting a little desperate about that. Two men were planted here a month ago. One of them is Sher Heraga, the steward I told you about. The other man came in as a bookkeeper. Two weeks ago, Heraga got word out that the bookkeeper had disappeared. Velladon and Ryter apparently got wise to what he was trying to do. So the Mooleys sent me here to find out exactly what was going on before they took action. I arrived four days ago."

She gave a regretful little headshake. "I waited almost a day before contacting Heraga. It seemed advisable to move very cautiously in the matter. But that made it a little too late to do anything. Quillan, for the past three days, the Seventh Star Hotel has been locked up like a bank vault. And except for ourselves, only the people who are in on the plot are aware of it."

"The message transmitters are inoperative?" he asked.

Reetal nodded. "The story is that a gravitic storm center in the area has disrupted transmissions completely for the time being."

"What about incoming ships?"

"Yours was the only one scheduled before the *Camelot* arrives. It left again eight hours ago. Nobody here had been let on board. The guests who wanted to apply for outgoing berths were told there were none open, that they'd have to wait for the *Camelot*."

She went over to a desk, unlocked a drawer, took out a sheaf of papers, and handed one of them to Quillan. "That's the layout of the Star," she said. "This five-level building over by the shell is the Executive Block. The Brotherhood and the commodore's men moved in there this morning. The Block is the Star's defense center. It's raid-proofed, contains the control officers and the transmitter and armament rooms. About the standard arrangement. While they hold the Executive Block, they have absolute control of the Star."

"If it's the defense center, it should be practically impossible to do anything about them there," Quillan agreed. "They could close it up, and dump the air out of the rest of the Star in a minute, if they had to. But there must be ... well, what about the lifeboats in the subspace section—and our pals must have a getaway ship stashed away somewhere?"

"They have two ships," Reetal said. "A souped-up armed freighter the Brotherhood came in on, and a large armed yacht which seems to be the commodore's personal property. Unfortunately, they're both in subspace locks."

"Why unfortunately?"

"Because they've sealed off subspace. Try portaling down there, and you'll find yourself looking at a battle-plastic bulkhead. There's no way of getting either to those ships or to the lifeboats."

Quillan lifted his eyebrows. "And *that* hasn't caused any comment? What about the maintenance

crews, the warehouse men, the—"

"All the work crews were hauled out of subspace this morning," Reetal said. "On the quiet, the Star's employees have been told that a gang of raiders was spotted in the warehouse area, and is at present cornered there. Naturally, the matter isn't to be mentioned to the guests, to avoid arousing unnecessary concern. And that explains everything very neatly. The absence of the security men, and why subspace is sealed off. Why the Executive Block is under guard, and can't be entered—and why the technical and office personnel in there don't come out, and don't communicate out. They've been put on emergency status, officially."

"Yunk," Quillan said disgustedly after a moment. "This begins to look like a hopeless situation, doll!"

"True."

"Let's see now—"

Reetal interrupted, "There is one portal still open to subspace. That's in the Executive Block, of course, and Heraga reports it's heavily guarded."

"How does he know?"

"The Block's getting its meals from Phalagon House. He floated a diner in there a few hours ago."

"Well," Quillan said, brightening, "perhaps a deft flavoring of poison—"

Reetal shook her head. "I checked over the hospital stocks. Not a thing there that wouldn't be spotted at once. Unless we can clobber them thoroughly, we can't afford to make them suspicious with a trick like that."

"Poison would be a bit rough on the office help, too," Quillan conceded. "They wouldn't be in on the deal."

"No, they're not. They're working under guard."

"Gas ... no, I suppose not. It would take too long to whip up something that could turn the trick." Quillan glanced at his watch. "If the *Camelot* docks at midnight, we've around six and a half hours left, doll! And I don't find myself coming up with any brilliant ideas. What have you thought of?"

Reetal hesitated a moment. "Nothing very brilliant either," she said then. "But there are two things we might try as a last resort."

"Let's hear them."

"I know a number of people registered in the Star at present who'd be carrying personal weapons. If they were told the facts, I could probably line up around twenty who'd be willing to make a try to get into the Executive Block, and take over either the control offices or the transmitter room. If we got a warning out to the *Camelot*, that would break up the plot. Of course, it wouldn't necessarily save the Star."

"No," Quillan said, "but it's worth trying if we can't think of something better. How would you get them inside?"

"We could crowd twenty men into one of those diner trucks, and Heraga could take us in."

"What kind of people are your pals?"

"A few smugglers and confidence men I've had connections with. Fairly good boys for this sort of thing. Then there's an old millionaire sportsman, with a party of six, waiting to transfer to the *Camelot* for a safari on Jontarou. Old Philmarron isn't all there, in my opinion, but he's dead game and loves any kind of a ruckus. We can count on him and his friends, if they're not too drunk at the moment. Still ... that's not too many to set against something less than a hundred professional guns, even though some of them must be down on the two ships."

"No, not enough." Quillan looked thoughtful. "What's the other idea?"

"Let the cat out of the bag generally. Tell the guests and the employees out here what's going on, and see if somebody can think of something that might be done."

He shook his head. "What you'd set off with that would be anywhere between a riot and a panic. The boys in the Executive Block would simply give us the breathless treatment. Apparently, they prefer to have everything looking quiet and normal when the *Camelot* gets here—"

"But they don't have to play it that way," Reetal agreed. "We might be dead for hours before the liner docks. If they keep the landing lock closed until what they want has been unloaded, nobody on the *Camelot* would realize what had happened before it was too late."

There was a moment's silence. Then Quillan said, "You mentioned you'd picked up a clue to what they're after. What was that?"

"Well, that's a curious thing," Reetal said. "On the trip out here, a young girl name of Solvey Kinmarten attached herself to me. She didn't want to talk much, but I gathered she was newly married, and that her husband was on board and was neglecting her. She's an appealing little thing, and she seemed so forlorn and upset that I adopted her for the rest of the run. After we arrived, of course, I pretty well forgot about the Kinmartens and their troubles.

"A few hours ago, Solvey suddenly came bursting into the suite where I'm registered. She was shaking all over. After I calmed her down a bit, she spilled out her story. She and her husband, Brock Kinmarten, are rest wardens. With another man named Eltak, whom Solvey describes as 'some sort of crazy old coot,' they're assigned to escort two deluxe private rest cubicles to a very exclusive sanatorium on Mezmiالي. But Brock told Solvey at the beginning of the trip that this was a very unusual assignment, that he didn't want her even to come near the cubicles. That wouldn't have bothered her so much, she says, but on the way here Brock became increasingly irritable and absent-minded. She knew he was worrying about the cubicles, and she began to wonder whether they weren't involved in something illegal. The pay was very high; they're both getting almost twice the regular warden fee for the job. One day, she found an opportunity to do a little investigating.

"The cubicles are registered respectively to a Lady Pendrake and a Major Pendrake. Lady Pendrake appears to be genuine; the cubicle is unusually large and constructed somewhat differently from the ones with which Solvey was familiar, but it was clear that it had an occupant. However, the life indicator on 'Major Pendrake's cubicle registered zero when she switched it on. If there was something inside it, it wasn't a living human being.

"That was all she learned at the time, because she was afraid Brock might catch her in the cubicle room. Here in the Star, the cubicles were taken to a suite reserved for Lady Pendrake. The other man, Eltak, stayed in the suite with the cubicles, while the Kinmartens were given other quarters. However, Brock was still acting oddly and spending most of his time in the Pendrake suite. So this morning, Solvey swiped his key to the suite and slipped in when she knew the two men had left it."

"She'd barely got there when she heard Brock and Eltak at the door again. She ran into the next room, and hid in a closet. Suddenly there was a commotion in the front room, and Solvey realized that men from the Star's security force had arrived and were arresting Brock and Eltak. They hauled both of them away, then floated the cubicles out and on a carrier and took them off too, locking the suite behind them.

"Solvey was in a complete panic, sure that she and Brock had become involved in some serious breach of the Warden Code. She waited a few minutes, then slipped out of the Pendrake suite, and looked me up to see if I couldn't help them. I had Heraga check, and he reported that the Kinmarten suite was under observation. Evidently, they wanted to pick up the girl, too. So I tucked her away in one of the suites in this section, and gave her something to put her to sleep. She's there now."

Quillan said, "And where are the prisoners and the cubicles?"

"In the Executive Block."

"How do you know?"

Reetal smiled briefly. "The Duke of Fluel told me."

"Huh? The Brotherhood knows you're here?"

"Relax," Reetal said. "Nobody but Heraga knows I'm working for the Mooleys. I told the Duke I had a big con deal set up when the *Camelot* came in—I even suggested he might like to get in on it. He laughed, and said he had other plans. But he won't mention to anyone that I'm here."

"Why not?"

"Because," Reetal said dryly, "what the Duke is planning to get in on is an hour of tender dalliance. Before the *Camelot* arrives, necessarily. The cold-blooded little skunk!" She hesitated a moment; when she spoke again, her voice had turned harsh and nasal, wicked amusement sounding through it. "Sort of busy at the moment, sweetheart, but we might find time for a drink or two later on in the evening, eh?"

Quillan grunted. "You're as good at the voice imitations as ever. How did you find out about the cubicles?"

"I took a chance and fed him a Moment of Truth."

"With Fluel," Quillan said thoughtfully, "that was taking a chance!"

"Believe me, I was aware of it! I've run into card-carrying sadists before, but the Duke's the only one who scares me silly. But it did work. He dropped in for a about a minute and a half, and came out without noticing a thing. Meanwhile, I'd got the answers to a few questions. The bomb with which they're planning to mop up behind them already has been planted up here in the normspace section. Fluel didn't know where; armaments experts took care of it. It's armed now. There's a firing switch on each of their ships, and both switches have to be tripped before the thing goes off. Part of what they're after is in those Pendrake rest cubicles—"

"Part of it?" Quillan asked.

"Uh-huh. An even hundred similar cubicles will be unloaded from the *Camelot*—the bulk of the haul; which is why Nome Lancion is supervising things on the liner. I started to ask what was in the cubicles, but I saw Fluel was beginning to lose that blank look they have under Truth, and switched back to light chitchat just before he woke up. Yaco's paying for the job—or rather, it *will* pay for the stuff, on delivery, and no questions asked."

"That's not very much help, is it?" Quillan said after a moment. "Something a big crooked industrial combine like Yaco thinks it can use—"

"It must expect to be able to use it to extremely good advantage," Reetal said. "The Brotherhood will collect thirty million credits for their part of the operation. The commodore's group presumably won't do any worse." She glanced past Quillan toward the room portal. "It's O.K., Heraga! Come in."

Sher Heraga was a lean, dark-skinned little man with a badly bent nose, black curly hair, and a nervous look. He regretted, he said, that he hadn't been able to uncover anything which might be a lead to the location of the bomb. Apparently, it wasn't even being guarded. And, of course, a bomb of the size required here would be quite easy to conceal.

"If they haven't placed guards over it," Reetal agreed, "it'll take blind luck to spot it! Unless we can get hold of one of the men who knows where it's planted—"

There was silence for some seconds. Then Quillan said, "Well, if we can't work out a good plan, we'd better see what we can do with one of the bad ones. Are the commodore's security men wearing uniforms?"

Heraga shook his head, "Not the ones I saw."

"Then here's an idea," Quillan said. "As things stand, barging into the Executive Block with a small armed group can't accomplish much. It might be more interesting than sitting around and waiting to be blown up, but it still would be suicide. However, if we could get things softened up and disorganized in there first—"

"Softened up and disorganized how?" Reetal asked.

"We can use that notion you had of having Heraga float in another diner. This time, I'm on board—in a steward's uniform, in case the guards check."

"They didn't the first time," Heraga said.

"Sloppy of them. Well, they're just gun hands. Anyway, once we're inside I shuck off the uniform and get out. Heraga delivers his goodies, and leaves again—"

Reetal gave him a look. "You'll get shot down the instant you're seen, dope!"

"I think not. There're two groups in there—around a hundred men in all—and they haven't had time to get well acquainted yet. I'll have my gun in sight, and anyone who sees me should figure I belong to the other group, until I run into one of the Brotherhood boys who knows me personally."

"Then that's when you get shot down. I understand the last time you and the Duke of Fluel met, he woke up with lumps."

"The Duke doesn't love me," Quillan admitted. "But there's nothing personal between me and Movaine or Marras Cooms—and I'll have a message for Movaine."

"What kind of a message?"

"I'll have to play that by ear a little. It depends on how things look in there. But I have a few ideas, based on what you've learned of the operation. Now, just what I can do when I get that far, I don't know yet. I'll simply try to louse the deal up as much as I can. That may take time, and, of course, it might turn out to be impossible to get word out to you."

"So what do we do meanwhile?" Reetal asked. "If we start lining up our attack group immediately, and then there's no action for another five or six hours, there's always the chance of a leak, with around twenty people in the know."

"And if there's a leak," Quillan agreed, "we've probably had it. No, you'd better wait with that! If I'm not out, and you haven't heard from me before the *Camelot*'s actually due to dock, Heraga can still take the group—everyone but yourself—in as scheduled."

"Why everyone but me?" Reetal asked.

"If nothing else works, you might find some way of getting a warning to the liner's security force after they've docked. It isn't much of a possibility, but we can't afford to throw it away."

"Yes, I see." Reetal looked reflective. "What do you think, Heraga?"

The little man shrugged. "You told me that Mr. Quillan is not inexperienced in dealing with, ah, his enemies. If he feels he might accomplish something in the Executive Block, I'm in favor of the plan. The situation certainly could hardly become worse."

"That's the spirit!" Quillan approved. "The positive outlook—that's what a think like this mainly takes. Can you arrange for the diner and the uniform?"

"Oh, yes," Heraga said, "I've had myself put in charge of that detail, naturally."

"Then what can you tell me about the Executive Block's layout?"

Reetal stood up. "Come over to the desk," she said. "We've got diagrams."

"The five levels, as you see," Heraga was explaining a few moments later, "are built directly into the curve of the Star's shells. Level Five, on the top, is therefore quite small. The other levels are fairly extensive. Two, Three, and Four could each accommodate a hundred men comfortably. These levels contain mainly living quarters, private offices, and the like. The Brotherhood men appear to be occupying the fourth level, Velladon's group the second. The third may be reserved for meetings between representatives of the two groups. All three of these levels are connected by single-exit portals to the large entrance area on the ground level.

"The portals stood open when I went in earlier today, and there were about twenty armed men lounging about the entrance hall. I recognized approximately half of them as being members of the Star's security force. The others were unfamiliar." Heraga cleared his throat. "There is a possibility that the two groups do not entirely trust each other."

Quillan nodded. "If they're playing around with something like sixty million CR, anybody would have to be crazy to trust the Brotherhood of Beldon. The transmitter room and the control officers are guarded, too?"

"Yes, but not heavily," Heraga said. "There seem to be only a few men stationed at each of those points. Ostensibly, they're there as a safe-guard—in case the imaginary raiders attempt to break out of the subspace section."

"What's the arrangement of the ordinary walk-in tube portals in the Executive Block?"

"There is one which interconnects the five levels. On each of the lower levels, there are, in addition, several portals which lead out to various points in the Seventh Star Hotel. On the fifth level, there is only one portal of this kind. Except for the portal which operates between the different levels in the Executive Block, all of them have been rendered unusable at present."

"Unusable in what way?"

"They have been sealed off on the Executive Block side."

"Can you get me a diagram of the entry and exit systems those outgoing portals connect with?" Quillan asked. "I might turn one of them usable again."

"Yes, I can do that."

"How about the communication possibilities?"

"The ComWeb system is functioning normally on the second, third, and fourth levels. It has been shut off on the first level—to avoid the spread of 'alarming rumors' by office personnel. There is no ComWeb on the fifth level."

Reetal said, "We'll shift our operating headquarters back to my registered suite then. The ComWebs are turned off in these vacant sections. I'll stay in the other suite in case you find a chance to signal in."

Heraga left a few minutes later to make his arrangements. Reetal smiled at Quillan, a little dubiously.

"Good luck, guy," she said. "Anything else to settle before you start off?"

Quillan nodded. "Couple of details. If you're going to be in your regular suite, and Fluel finds himself with some idle time on hand, he might show up for the dalliance you mentioned."

Reetal's smile changed slightly. Her left hand fluffed the hair at the back of her head, flicked down again. There was a tiny click, and Quillan looked at a small jeweled hair-clasp in her palm, its needle beak pointing at him.

"It hasn't got much range," Reetal said, "but within ten feet it will scramble the Duke's brains just as thoroughly as they need to be scrambled."

"Good enough," Quillan said. "Just don't give that boy the ghost of a chance, doll. He has a rep for playing very unnice games with the ladies."

"I know his reputation." Reetal replaced the tiny gun in her hair. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Let's look in on the Kinmarten chick for a moment. If she's awake, she may have remembered something or other by now that she didn't think to tell you."

They found Solvey Kinmarten awake, and tearfully glad to see Reetal. Quillan was introduced as a member of the legal profession who would do what he could for Solvey and her husband. Solvey frowned prettily, trying very hard to remember anything that might be of use. But it appeared that she had told Reetal all she knew.

The blue and white Phalagon House diner, driven by Heraga, was admitted without comment into the Executive Block. It floated on unchallenged through the big entry hall and into a corridor. Immediately behind the first turn of the corridor, the diner paused a few seconds. Its side door opened and closed. The diner moved on.

Quillan, coatless and with the well-worn butt of a big Miam Devil Special protruding from the holster on his right hip, came briskly back along the corridor. Between fifteen and twenty men, their guns also conspicuously in evidence, were scattered about the entrance hall, expressions and attitudes indicating a curious mixture of boredom and uneasy tension. The eyes of about half of them swiveled around to Quillan when he came into the hall; then, with one exception, they looked indifferently away again.

The exception, leaning against the wall near the three open portals to the upper levels, continued to stare as Quillan came toward him, forehead creased in a deep scowl as if he were painfully ransacking his mind for something. Quillan stopped in front of him.

"Chum," he asked, "any idea where Movaine is at the moment? They just give me this message for him—"

Still scowling, the other scratched his chin and blinked. "Uh ... dunno for sure," he said after a moment. "He oughta be in the third level conference room with the rest of 'em. Uh ... dunno you oughta barge in there right now, pal! The commodore's *reee-llly* hot about somethin'!"

Quillan looked worried. "Gotta chance it, I guess! Message is pretty important, they say—" He turned, went through the center portal of the three, abruptly found himself walking along a wide, well-lit hall.

Nobody in sight here, or in the first intersecting passage he came to. When he reached the next passage, he heard voices on the right, turned toward them, went by a string of closed doors on both sides until, forty feet on, the passage angled again and opened into a long, high-ceilinged room. The voices came through an open door on the right side of the room. Standing against the wall beside the door were two men whose heads turned sharply toward Quillan as he appeared in the passage.

The short, chunky one scowled. The big man next to him, the top of whose head had been permanently seared clear of hair years before by a near miss from a blaster, dropped his jaw slowly. His eyes popped.

"My God!" he said.

"Movaine in there, Baldy?" Quillan inquired, coming up.

"Movaine! He ... you ... how—"

The chunky man took out his gun, waved it negligently at Quillan. "Tell the ape to blow, Perk. He isn't wanted here."

"Ape?" Quillan asked softly. His right hand moved, had the gun by the barrel, twisted, reversed the gun, jammed it back with some violence into the chunky man's stomach. "Ape?" he repeated. The chunky man went white.

"Bad News—" Baldy Perk breathed. "Take it easy! That's Orca. He's the commodore's torpedo. How —"

"Where's Movaine?"

"Movaine ... he ... uh—"

"All right, he's not here. And Lancion can't have arrived yet. Is Cooms in there?"

"Yeah," Baldy Perk said weakly. "Cooms is in there, Quillan."

"Let's go in." Quillan withdrew the gun, slid it into a pocket, smiled down at Orca. "Get it back from your boss, slob. Be seeing you!"

Orca's voice was a husky whisper.

"You will, friend! You will!"

The conference room was big and sparsely furnished. Four men sat at the long table in its center. Quillan knew two of them—Marras Cooms, second in command of the Beldon Brotherhood's detachment here, and the Duke of Fluel, Movaine's personal gun. Going by Heraga's descriptions, the big, florid-faced man with white hair and flowing white mustaches who was doing the talking was Velladon, the commodore; while the fourth man, younger, wiry, with thinning black hair plastered back across his skull, would be Ryter, chief of the Star's security force.

"What I object to primarily is that the attempt was made without obtaining my consent, and secretly," Velladon was saying, with a toothy grin but in a voice that shook with open fury. "And now it's been made and bungled, you have a nerve asking for our help. The problem is yours—and you better take care of it fast! I can't spare Ryter. If—"

"Cooms," Baldy Perk broke in desperately from the door, "Bad News Quillan's here an'—"

The heads of the four men at the table came around simultaneously. The eyes of two of them widened for an instant. Then Marras Cooms began laughing softly.

"Now everything's happened!" he said.

"Cooms," the commodore said testily, "I prefer not to be interrupted. Now—"

"Can't be helped, commodore," Quillan said, moving forward, Perk shuffling along unhappily beside him. "I've got news for Movaine, and the news can't wait."

"Movaine?" the commodore repeated, blue eyes bulging at Quillan. "Movaine! Cooms, who *is* this man?"

"You're looking at Bad News Quillan," Cooms said. "A highjacking specialist, with somewhat numerous sidelines. But the point right now is that he isn't a member of the Brotherhood."

"*What!*" Velladon's big fist smashed down on the table. "Now what kind of a game ... how did he get *in* here?"

"Well," Quillan said mildly, "I oozed in through the north wall about a minute ago. I—"

He checked, conscious of having created some kind of sensation. The four men at the table were staring up at him without moving. Baldy Perk appeared to be holding his breath. Then the

commodore coughed, cleared his throat, drummed his fingers on the table.

He said reflectively: "He could have news—good or bad—at that! For all of us." He chewed on one of his mustache tips, grinned suddenly up at Quillan. "Well, sit down, friend! Let's talk. You can't talk to Movaine, you see. Movaine's um, had an accident. Passed away suddenly half an hour ago."

"Sorry to hear it," Quillan said. "That's the sort of thing that happens so often in the Brotherhood." He swung a chair around, sat down facing the table. "You're looking well tonight, Fluel," he observed.

The Duke of Fluel, lean and dapper in silver jacket and tight-fitting silver trousers, gave him a wintry smile, said nothing.

"Now, then, friend," Velladon inquired confidentially, "just what was your business with Movaine?"

"Well, it will come to around twenty per cent of the take," Quillan informed him. "We won't argue about a half-million CR more or less. But around twenty per."

The faces thoughtful. After some seconds, the commodore asked, "And who's we?"

"A number of citizens," Quillan said, "who have been rather unhappy since discovering that you, too, are interested in Lady Pendrake and her pals. We'd gone to considerable expense and trouble to ... well, her ladyship was scheduled to show up in Mezmiali, you know. And now she isn't going to show up there. All right, that's business. Twenty per—no hard feelings. Otherwise, it won't do you a bit of good to blow up the Star and the liner. There'd still be loose talk—maybe other complications, too. You know how it goes. You wouldn't be happy, and neither would Yaco. Right?"

The commodore's massive head turned back to Cooms. "How well do you know this man, Marras?"

Cooms grinned dryly. "Well enough."

"Is he leveling?"

"He'd be nuts to be here if he wasn't. And he isn't nuts—at least, not that way."

"There might be a question about that," Fluel observed. He looked at the commodore. "Why not ask him for a couple of the names that are in it with him?"

"Hagready and Boltan," Quillan said.

Velladon chewed the other mustache tip. "I know Hagready. If he—"

"I know both of them," Cooms said. "Boltan works highjacking crews out of Orado. Quillan operates there occasionally."

"Pappy Boltan's an old business associate," Quillan agreed. "Reliable sort of a guy. Doesn't mind taking a few chances either."

Velladon's protruding blue eyes measured him a moment. "We can check on those two, you know—"

"Check away," Quillan said.

Velladon nodded. "We will." He was silent for a second or two, then glanced over at Cooms. "There've been no leaks on our side," he remarked. "And they must have known about this for weeks! Of all the inept, bungling—"

"Ah, don't be too hard on the Brotherhood, commodore," Quillan said. "Leaks happen. You ought to know."

"What do you mean?" Velladon snapped.

"From what we heard, the Brotherhood's pulling you out of a hole here. You should feel rather kindly toward them."

The commodore stared at him reflectively. Then he grinned. "Could be I should," he said, "Did you come here alone?"

"Yes."

The commodore nodded. "If you're bluffing, God help you. If you're not, your group's in. Twenty per. No time for haggling—we can raise Yaco's price to cover it." He stood up, and Ryter stood up with him. "Marras," the commodore went on, "tell him what's happened. If he's half as hot as he sounds,

he's the boy to put on that job. Let him get in on a little of the work for the twenty per cent. Ryter, come on. We—"

"One moment, sir," Quillan interrupted. He took Orca's gun by the muzzle from his pocket, held it out to Velladon. "One of your men lost this thing. The one outside the door. If you don't mind—he might pout if he doesn't get it back."

The fifth level of the Executive Block appeared to be, as Heraga had said, quite small. The tiny entry hall, on which two walk-in portals opened, led directly into the large room where the two Pendrake rest cubicles had been placed. One of the cubicles now stood open. To right and left, a narrow passage stretched away from the room, ending apparently in smaller rooms.

Baldy Perk was perspiring profusely.

"Now right here," he said in a low voice, "was where I was standing. Movaine was over there, on the right of the cubicle, and Cooms was beside him. Rubero was a little behind me, hanging on to the punk—that Kinmarten. An' the Duke"—he nodded back at the wide doorspace to the hall—"was standing back there.

"All right. The punk's opened the cubicle a crack, looking like he's about to pass out while he's doin' it. This bearded guy, Eltak, stands in front of the cubicle, holding the gadget he controls the thing with—"

"Where's the gadget now?" Quillan asked.

"Marras Cooms' got it."

"How does it work?"

Baldy shook his head. "We can't figure it out. It's got all kinds of little knobs and dials on it. Push this one an' it squeaks, turn that one an' it buzzes. Like that."

Quillan nodded. "All right. What happened?"

"Well, Movaine tells the old guy to go ahead an' do the demonstrating. The old guy sort of grins and fiddles with the gadget. The cubicle door pops open an' this thing comes pouring out. I never seen nothin' like it! It's like a barn door with dirty fur on it! It swirls up an' around an'—it wraps its upper end clean around poor Movaine. He never even screeches.

"Then everything pops at once. The old guy is laughing like crazy, an' that half-smart Rubero drills him right through the head. I take one shot at the thing, low so's not to hit Movaine, an' then we're all running, I'm halfway to the hall when Cooms tears past me like a rocket. The Duke an' the others are already piling out through the portal. I get to the hall, and there's this terrific smack of sound in the room. I look back ... an' ... an'—" Baldy paused and gulped.

"And what?" Quillan asked.

"There, behind the cubicles, I see poor Movaine stickin' halfway out o' the wall!" Baldy reported in a hushed whisper.

"Halfway out of the wall?"

"From the waist up he's in it! From the waist down he's dangling into the room! I tell you, I never seen nothin' like it."

"And this Hlat creature—"

"That's gone. I figure the smack I heard was when it hit the wall flat, carrying Movaine. It went on into it. Movaine didn't—at least, the last half of him didn't."

"Well," Quillan said after a pause, "in a way, Movaine got his demonstration. The Hlats can move through solid matter and carry other objects along with them, as advertised. If Yaco can work out how it's done and build a gadget that does the same thing, they're getting the Hlats cheap. What happened then?"

"I told Marras Cooms about Movaine, and he sent me and a half dozen other boys back up here with riot guns to see what we could do for him. Which was nothin', of course." Baldy gulped again. "We finally cut this end of him off with a beam and took it back down."

"The thing didn't show up while you were here?"

Baldy shuddered and said, "Naw."

"And the technician ... Eltak ... was dead?"

"Sure. Hole in his head you could shove your fist through."

"Somebody," Quillan observed, "ought to drill Rubero for that stupid trick!"

"The Duke did—first thing after we got back to the fourth level."

"So the Hlat's on the loose, and all we really have at the moment are the cubicles ... and Rest Warden Kinmarten. Where's he, by the way?"

"He tried to take off when we got down to Level Four, and somebody cold-cocked him. The doc says he ought to be coming around again pretty soon."

Quillan grunted, shoved the Miam Devil Special into its holster, said, "O.K., you stay here where you can watch the room and those passages and the hall. If you feel the floor start moving under, scream. I'll take a look at the cubicle."

Lady Pendrake's cubicle was about half as big again as a standard one; but, aside from one detail, its outer settings, instruments, and operating devices appeared normal. The modification was a recess almost six feet long and a foot wide and deep, in one side, which could be opened either to the room or to the interior of the rest cubicle, but not simultaneously to both. Quillan already knew its purpose; the supposed other cubicle was a camouflaged food locker, containing fifty-pound slabs of sea beef, each of which represented a meal for the Hlat. The recess made it possible to feed it without allowing it to be seen, or, possibly, attempting to emerge. Kinmarten's nervousness, as reported by his wife, seemed understandable. Any rest warden might get disturbed over such a charge.

Quillan asked over his shoulder, "Anyone find out yet why the things can't get out of the closed rest cubicle?"

"Yeah," Baldy Perk said. "Kinmarten says it's the cubicle's defense fields. They could get through the material. They can't get through the field."

"Someone think to energize the Executive Block's battle fields?" Quillan inquired.

"Yeah. Velladon took care of that before he came screaming up to the third level to argue with Cooms and Fluel."

"So it can't slip out of the Block unless it shows itself down on the ground level when the entry lock's open."

"Yeah," Baldy muttered. "But I dunno. Is that good?"

Quillan looked at him. "Well, we *would* like it back."

"Why? There's fifty more coming in on the liner tonight."

"We don't have the fifty yet. If someone louses up the detail—"

"Yawk!" Baldy said faintly. There was a crash of sound as his riot gun went off. Quillan spun about, hair bristling, gun out. "What happened?"

"I'll swear," Baldy said, white-faced, "I saw something moving along that passage!"

Quillan looked, saw nothing, slowly replaced the gun. "Baldy," he said, "if you think you see it again, just say so. That's an order! If it comes at us, we get out of this level fast. But we don't shoot before we have to. If we kill it, it's no good to us. Got that?"

"Yeah," Baldy said. "But I got an idea now, Bad News." He nodded at the other cubicle. "Let's leave that meat box open."

"Why?"

"If it's hungry," Baldy explained simply, "I'd sooner it wrapped itself around a few chunks of sea beef, an' not around me."

Quillan punched him encouragingly in the shoulder. "Baldy," he said, "in your own way, you *have* had an idea! But we won't leave the meat box open. When Kinmarten wakes up, I want him to show me how to bait this cubicle with a piece of sea beef, so it'll snap shut if the Hlat goes inside. Meanwhile it won't hurt if it gets a little hungry."

"That," said Baldy, "isn't the way *I* feel about it."

"There must be around a hundred and fifty people in the Executive Block at present," Quillan said. "Look at it that way! Even if the thing keeps stuffing away, your odds are pretty good, Baldy."

Baldy shuddered.

Aside from a dark bruise high on his forehead, Brock Kinmarten showed no direct effects of having been knocked out. However, his face was strained and his voice not entirely steady. It was obvious that the young rest warden had never been in a similarly unnerving situation before. But he was making a valiant effort not to appear frightened and, at the same time, to indicate that he would cooperate to the best of his ability with his captors.

He'd regained consciousness by the time Quillan and Perk returned to the fourth level, and Quillan suggested bringing him to Marras Cooms' private quarters for questioning. The Brotherhood chief agreed; he was primarily interested in finding out how the Hlat-control device functioned.

Kinmarten shook his head. He knew nothing about the instrument, he said, except that it was called a Hlat-talker. It was very unfortunate that Eltak had been shot, because Eltak undoubtedly could have told them all they wanted to know about it. If what he had told Kinmarten was true, Eltak had been directly involved in the development of the device.

"Was he some Federation scientist?" Cooms asked, fiddling absently with the mysterious cylindrical object.

"No, sir," the young man said. "But—again if what he told me was the truth—he was the man who actually discovered these Hlats. At least, he was the first man to discover them who wasn't immediately killed by them."

Cooms glanced thoughtfully at Quillan, then asked, "And where was that?"

Kinmarten shook his head again. "He didn't tell me. And I didn't really want to know. I was anxious to get our convoy to its destination, and then to be relieved of the assignment. I ... well, I've been trained to act as Rest Warden to human beings, after all, not to monstrosities!" He produced an uncertain smile, glancing from one to the other of his interrogators. The smile promptly faded out again.

"You've no idea at all then about the place they came from?" Cooms asked expressionlessly.

"Oh, yes," Kinmarten said hastily. "Eltak talked a great deal about the Hlats, and actually—except for its location—gave me a fairly good picture of what the planet must be like. For one thing, it's an uncolonized world, of course. It must be terratype or very nearly so, because Eltak lived there for fifteen years with apparently only a minimum of equipment. The Hlats are confined to a single large island. He discovered them by accident and—"

"What was he doing there?"

"Well, sir, he came from Hyles-Frisian. He was a crim ... he'd been engaged in some form of piracy, and when the authorities began looking for him, he decided it would be best to get clean out of the Hub. He cracked up his ship on this world and couldn't leave again. When he discovered the Hlats and realized their peculiar ability, he kept out of their way and observed them. He found out they had a means of communicating with each other, and that he could duplicate it. That stopped them from harming him, and eventually, he said, he was using them like hunting dogs. They were accustomed to co-operating with one another, because when there was some animal around that was too large for one of them to handle, they would attack, it in a group...."

He went on for another minute or two on the subject. The Hlats—the word meant "rock lion" in one of the Hyles-Frisian dialects, describing a carnivorous animal which had some superficial resemblance to the creatures Eltak had happened on—frequented the seacoast and submerged themselves in sand, rocks and debris, whipping up out of it to seize some food animal, and taking it down with them again to devour it at leisure.

Quillan interrupted, "You heard what happened to the man it attacked on the fifth level?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why would the thing have left him half outside the wall as it did?"

Kinmarten said that it must simply have been moving too fast. It could slip into and out of solid substances without a pause itself, but it needed a little time to restructure an object it was carrying in the same manner. No more time, however, than two or three seconds—depending more on the nature of the object than on its size, according to Eltak.

"It can restructure *anything* in that manner?" Quillan asked.

Kinmarten hesitated. "Well, sir, I don't know. I suppose there might be limitations on its ability. Eltak told me the one we were escorting had been the subject of extensive experimentation during the past year, and that the results are very satisfactory."

"Suppose it carries a living man through a wall. Will the man still be alive when he comes out on the other side, assuming the Hlat doesn't kill him deliberately?"

"Yes, sir. The process itself wouldn't hurt him."

Quillan glanced at Cooms. "You know," he said, "we might be letting Yaco off too cheaply!"

Cooms raised an eyebrow warningly, and Quillan grinned. "Our friend will be learning about Yaco soon enough. Why did Eltak tell the creature to attack, Kinmarten?"

"Sir, I don't know," Kinmarten said. "He was a man of rather violent habits. My impression, however, was that he was simply attempting to obtain a hostage."

"How did he get off that island with the Hlat?"

"A University League explorer was investigating the planet. Eltak contacted them and obtained the guarantee of a full pardon and a large cash settlement in return for what he could tell them about the Hlats. They took him and this one specimen along for experimentation."

"What about the Hlats on the *Camelot*?"

"Eltak said those had been quite recently trapped on the island."

Cooms ran his fingers over the cylinder, producing a rapid series of squeaks and whistles. "That's one thing Yaco may not like," he observed. "They won't have a monopoly on the thing."

Quillan shook his head. "Their scientists don't have to work through red tape like the U-League. By the time the news breaks—if the Federation ever intends to break it—Yaco will have at least a five-year start on everyone else. That's all an outfit like that needs." He looked at Kinmarten. "Any little thing you haven't thought to tell us, friend?" he inquired pleasantly.

A thin film of sweat showed suddenly on Kinmarten's forehead.

"No, sir," he said. "I've really told you everything I know. I—"

"Might try him under dope," Cooms said absently.

"Uh-uh!" Quillan said, "I want him wide awake to help me bait the cubicle for the thing. Has Velladon shown any indication of becoming willing to co-operate in hunting it?"

Cooms gestured with his head. "Ask Fluel! I sent him down to try to patch things up with the commodore. He just showed up again."

Quillan glanced around. The Duke was lounging in the doorway. He grinned slightly, said, "Velladon's still sore at us. But he'll talk to Quillan. Kinmarten here ... did he tell you his wife's on the Star?"

Brock Kinmarten went utterly white. Cooms looked at him, said softly, "No, that must have slipped his mind."

Fluel said, "Yeah, Well, she is. And Ryter says they'll have her picked up inside half an hour. When they bring her in, we really should check on how candid Kinmarten's been about everything."

The rest warden said in a voice that shook uncontrollably, "Gentlemen, my wife knows absolutely nothing about these matters! I swear it! She—"

Quillan stood up. "Well, I'll go see if I can't get Velladon in a better mood. Are you keeping that Hlat-talker, Cooms?"

Cooms smiled. "I am."

"Marras figures," the Duke's flat voice explained, "that if the thing comes into the room and he squeaks at it a few times, he won't get hurt."

"That's possible," Cooms said, unruffled. "At any rate, I intend to hang on to it."

"Well, I wouldn't play around with those buttons too much," Quillan observed.

"Why not?"

"You might get lucky and tap out some pattern that spells 'Come to chow' in the Hlat's vocabulary."

There were considerably more men in evidence on Level Two than on the fourth, and fewer signs of nervousness. The Star men had been told of the Hlat's escape from its cubicle, but weren't taking it too seriously. Quillan was conducted to the commodore and favored with an alarmingly toothy grin. Ryter, the security chief, joined them a few seconds later. Apparently, Velladon had summoned him.

Velladon said, "Ryter here's made a few transmitter calls. We hear Pappy Boltan pulled his outfit out of the Orado area about a month ago. Present whereabouts unknown. Hagready went off on some hush-hush job at around the same time."

Quillan smiled. "Uh-huh! So he did."

"We also," said Ryter, "learned a number of things about you personally." He produced a thin smile. "You lead a busy and—apparently—profitable life."

"Business is fair," Quillan agreed. "But it can always be improved."

The commodore turned on the toothy grin. "So all right," he growled, "you're clear. We rather liked what we learned. Eh, Ryter?"

Ryter nodded.

"This Brotherhood of Beldon, now—" The commodore shook his head heavily.

Quillan was silent a moment. "They might be getting sloppy," he said. "I don't know. It's one possibility. They used to be a rather sharp outfit, you know."

"That's what I'd heard!" Velladon chewed savagely on his mustache, asked finally, "What's another possibility?"

Quillan leaned back in his chair. "Just a feeling, so far. But the business with the cubicle upstairs might have angles that weren't mentioned."

They looked at him thoughtfully. Ryter said, "Mind amplifying that?"

"Cooms told me," Quillan said, "that Nome Lancion had given Movaine instructions to make a test with Lady Pendrake on the quiet and find out if those creatures actually can do what they're supposed to do. I think he was telling the truth. Nome tends to be overcautious when it's a really big deal. Unless he's sure of the Hlats, he wouldn't want to be involved in a thing like blowing up the Star and the liner."

The commodore scowled absently. "Uh-huh," he said. "He knows we can't back out of it—"

"All right. The Brotherhood's full of ambitious men. Behind Lancion, Movaine was top man. Cooms behind him; Fluel behind Cooms. Suppose that Hlat-control device Cooms is hanging on to so tightly isn't as entirely incomprehensible as they make it out to be. Suppose Cooms makes a deal with Eltak. Eltak tickles the gadget, and the Hlat kills Movaine. Rubero immediately guns down Eltak—and is killed by Fluel a couple of minutes later, supposedly for blowing his top and killing the man who knew how to control the Hlat."

Ryter cleared his throat. "Fluel was Movaine's gun," he observed.

"So he was," Quillan said. "Would you like the Duke to be yours?"

Ryter grinned, shook his head. "No, thanks!"

Quillan looked back at Velladon. "How well are you actually covered against the Brotherhood?"

"Well, *that's* air-tight," the commodore said. "We've got 'em outgunned here. When the liner lands, we'll be about even. But Lancion won't start anything. We're too even. Once we're clear of the Star, we don't meet again. We deal with Yaco individually. The Brotherhood has the Hlats, and we have the trained Federation technicians accompanying them, who ... who—"

"Who alone are supposed to be able to inform Yaco how to control the Hlats," Ryter finished for him. The security chief's face was expressionless.

"By God!" the commodore said softly.

"Well, it's only a possibility that somebody's playing dirty," Quillan remarked. "We'd want to be sure of it. But if anyone can handle a Hlat with the control instrument, the Brotherhood has an advantage now that it isn't talking about—it can offer Yaco everything Yaco needs in one package. Of course, Yaco might still be willing to pay for the Hlat technicians. If it didn't, you and Ryter could make the same kind of trouble for it that my friends can."

The color was draining slowly from Velladon's face. "There's a difference," he said. "If we threaten to make trouble for Yaco, they'd see to it that our present employers learn that Ryter and I are still alive."

"That's the Mooleys, eh?"

"Yes."

"Tough." Quillan knuckled his chin thoughtfully. "Well, let's put it this way then," he said. "My group doesn't have *that* kind of problem, but if things worked out so that we'd have something more substantial than nuisance value to offer Yaco, we'd prefer it, of course."

Velladon nodded. "Very understandable! Under the circumstances, co-operation appears to be indicated, eh?"

"That's what I had in mind."

"You've made a deal," Velladon said. "Any immediate suggestions?"

Quillan looked at his watch. "A couple. We don't want to make any mistake about this. It's still almost five hours before the *Camelot* pulls in, and until she does you're way ahead on firepower. I wouldn't make any accusations just now. But you might mention to Cooms you'd like to borrow the Hlat gadget to have it examined by some of your technical experts. The way he reacts might tell us something. If he balks, the matter shouldn't be pushed too hard at the moment—it's a tossup whether you or the Brotherhood has a better claim to the thing.

"But then there's Kinmarten, the rest warden in charge of the cubicle. I talked with him while Cooms and Fluel were around, but he may have been briefed on what to say. Cooms mentioned doping him, which could be a convenient way to keeping him shut up, assuming he knows more than he's told. He's one of the personnel you're to offer Yaco. I think you can insist on having

Kinmarten handed over to you immediately. It should be interesting again to see how Cooms reacts."

Velladon's big head nodded vigorously. "Good idea!"

"By the way," Quillan said, "Fluel mentioned you've been looking for Kinmarten's wife, the second rest warden on the Pendrake convoy. Found her yet?"

"Not a trace, so far," Ryter said.

"That's a little surprising, too, isn't it?"

"Under the circumstances," the commodore said, "it might not be surprising at all!" He had regained his color, was beginning to look angry. "If they—"

"Well," Quillan said soothingly, "we don't *know*. It's just that things do seem to be adding up a little. Now, there's one other point. We should do something immediately about catching that Hlat."

Velladon grunted and picked at his teeth with his thumbnail. "It would be best to get it back in its cubicle, of course. But I'm not worrying about it—just an animal, after all. Even the light hardware those Beldon fancy Dans carry should handle it. You use a man-sized gun, I see. So do I. If it shows up around here, it gets smeared, that's all. There're fifty more of the beasts on the *Camelot*."

Quillan nodded. "You're right on that. But there's the possibility that it is being controlled by the Brotherhood at present. If it is, it isn't just an animal any more. It could be turned into a thoroughly dangerous nuisance."

The commodore thought a moment, nodded. "You're right, I suppose. What do you want to do about it?"

"Baiting the cubicle on the fifth level might work. Then there should be life-detectors in the Star's security supplies—"

Ryter nodded. "We have a couple of dozen of them, but not in the Executive Block. They were left in the security building."

The commodore stood up. "You stay here with Ryter," he told Quillan. "There're a couple of other things I want to go over with you two. I'll order the life-detectors from the office here—second passage down, isn't it, Ryter?... And, Ryter, I have another idea. I'm pulling the man in space-armor off the subspace portal and detailing him to Level Five." He grinned at Quillan. "That boy's got a brace of grenades and built-in spray guns! If Cooms is thinking of pulling any funny stunts up there, he'll think again."

The commodore headed briskly down the narrow passageway, his big holstered gun slapping his thigh with every step. The two security guards stationed at the door to the second level office came to attention as he approached, saluted smartly. He grunted, went in without returning the salutes, and started over toward the ComWeb on a desk at the far end of the big room, skirting the long, dusty-looking black rug beside one wall.

Velladon unbuckled his gun belt, placed the gun on the desk, sat down and switched on the ComWeb.

Behind him, the black rug stirred silently and rose up.

"You called that one," Ryter was saying seven or eight minutes later, "almost too well!"

Quillan shook his head, poked at the commodore's gun on the desk with his finger, looked about the silent office and back at the door where a small group of security men stood staring in at them.

"Three men gone without a sound!" he said. He indicated the glowing disk of the ComWeb. "He had time enough to turn it on, not time enough to make his call. Any chance of camouflaged portals in this section?"

"No," Ryter said. "I know the location of every portal in the Executive Block. No number of men could have taken Velladon and the two guards without a fight anyway. We'd have heard it. It didn't happen that way."

"Which leaves," Quillan said, "one way it could have happened." He jerked his head toward the door.

"Will those men keep quiet?"

"If I tell them to."

"Then play it like this. Two guards have vanished. The Hlat obviously did it. The thing's deadly. That'll keep every man in the group on the alert every instant from now on. But we don't say Velladon has vanished. He's outside in the Star at the moment, taking care of something."

Ryter licked his lips. "What does that buy us?"

"If the Brotherhood's responsible for this—"

"I don't take much stock in coincidences," Ryter said.

"Neither do I. But the Hlat's an animal; it can't tell them it's carried out the job. If they don't realize we suspect them, it gives us some advantage. For the moment, we just carry on as planned, and get rid of the Hlat in one way or another as the first step. The thing's three times as dangerous as anyone suspected—except, apparently, the Brotherhood. Get the life-detectors over here as soon as you can, and slap a space-armor guard on the fifth level."

Ryter hesitated, nodded. "All right."

"Another thing," Quillan said, "Cooms may have the old trick in mind of working from the top down. If he can take you out along with a few other key men, he might have this outfit demoralized to the point of making up for the difference in the number of guns—especially if the Hlat's still on his team. You'd better keep a handful of the best boys you have around here glued to your back from now on."

Ryter smiled bleakly. "Don't worry. I intend to. What about you?"

"I don't think they're planning on giving me any personal attention at the moment. My organization is outside, not here. And it would look odd to the Brotherhood if I started dragging a few Star guards around with me at this point."

Ryter shrugged. "Suit yourself. It's your funeral if you've guessed wrong."

"There was nothing," Quillan told Marras Cooms, "that you could actually put a finger on. It was just that the commodore and Ryter may have something up their sleeves. Velladon's looking too self-satisfied to suit me."

The Brotherhood chief gnawed his lower lip reflectively. He seemed thoughtful, not too disturbed. Cooms might be thoroughly afraid of the escaped Hlat, but he wouldn't have reached his present position in Nome Lancion's organization if he had been easily frightened by what other men were planning.

He said, "I warned Movaine that if Velladon learned we'd checked out the Hlat, he wasn't going to like it."

"He doesn't," Quillan said. "He regards it as something pretty close to an attempted double cross."

Cooms grinned briefly. "It was."

"Of course. The question is, what can he do about it? He's got you outgunned two to one, but if he's thinking of jumping you before Lancion gets here, he stands to lose more men than he can afford to without endangering the entire operation for himself."

Cooms was silent a few seconds. "There's an unpleasant possibility which didn't occur to me until a short while ago," he said then. "The fact is that Velladon actually may have us outgunned here by something like four to one. If that's the case, he can afford to lose quite a few men. In fact, he'd prefer to."

Quillan frowned. "*Four* to one? How's that?"

Cooms said, "The commodore told us he intended to let only around half of the Seventh Star's security force in on the Hlat deal. The other half was supposed to have been dumped out of one of the subspace section's locks early today, without benefit of suits. We had no reason to disbelieve him. Velladon naturally would want to cut down the number of men who got in on the split with him to as many as he actually needed. But if he's been thinking about eliminating us from the game, those other men may still be alive and armed."

Quillan grunted. "I see. You know, that could explain something that looked a little odd to me."

"What was that?" Cooms asked.

Quillan said, "After they discovered down there that two of their guards were missing and decided the Hlat must have been on their level, I tried to get hold of the commodore again. Ryter told me Velladon won't be available for a while, that he's outside in the Star, taking care of something there. I wondered what could be important enough to get Velladon to leave the Executive Block at present, but—"

"Brother, I'm way ahead of you!" Cooms said. His expression hardened. "That doesn't look good. But at least he can't bring in reinforcements without tipping us off. We've got our own guards down with theirs at the entrance."

Quillan gave him a glance, then nodded at the wall beyond them. "That's a portal over there, Marras. How many of them on this level?"

"Three or four. Why? The outportals have been plugged, man! Sealed off. Fluel checked them over when we moved in."

"Sure they're sealed." Quillan stood up, went to the portal, stood looking at the panel beside it a moment, then pressed on it here and there, and removed it. "Come over here, friend. I suppose portal work's been out of your line. I'll show you how fast a thing like that can get unplugged!" He slid a pocketbook-sized tool kit out of his belt, snapped it open. About a minute later, the lifeless VACANT sign above the portal flickered twice, then acquired a steady white glow.

"Portal in operation," Quillan announced. "I'll seal it off again now. But that should give you the idea."

Cooms' tongue flicked over his lips. "Could somebody portal through to this level from the Star while the exits are sealed here?"

"If the mechanisms have been set for that purpose, the portals can be opened again at any time from the Star side. The Duke's an engineer of sorts, isn't he? Let him check on it. He should have been thinking of the point himself, as far as that goes. Anyway, Velladon can bring in as many men as he likes to his own level without using the main entrance." He considered. "I didn't see anything to indicate that he's started doing it—"

Marras Cooms shrugged irritably. "That means nothing! It would be easy enough to keep half a hundred men hidden away on any of the lower levels."

"I suppose that's right. Well, if the commodore intends to play rough, you should have some warning anyway."

"What kind of warning?"

"There's Kinmarten and that Hlat-talking gadget, for example," Quillan pointed out. "Velladon would want both of those in his possession and out of the way where they can't get hurt before he starts any shooting."

Cooms looked at him a few seconds. "Ryter," he said then, "sent half a dozen men up here for Kinmarten just after you got back! Velladon's supposed to deliver the Hlats' attendants to Yaco, so I let them have Kinmarten." He paused. "They asked for the Hlat-talker, too."

Quillan grunted. "Did you give them that?"

"No."

"Well," Quillan said after a moment, "that doesn't necessarily mean that we're in for trouble with the Star group. But it does mean, I think, that we'd better stay ready for it!" He stood up. "I'll get back down there and go on with the motions of getting the hunt for the Hlat organized. Velladon would sooner see the thing get caught, too, of course, so he shouldn't try to interfere with that. If I spot anything that looks suspicious, I'll get the word to you."

"I never," said Orca, unconsciously echoing Baldy Perk, "saw anything like it!" The commodore's chunky little gunman was ashen-faced. The circle of Star men standing around him hardly looked happier. Most of them were staring down at the empty lower section of a suit of space armor which appeared to have been separated with a neat diagonal slice from its upper part.

"Let's get it straight," Ryter said, a little unsteadily. "You say this half of the suit was lying against the wall like *that*?"

"Not exactly," Quillan told him. "When we got up to the fifth level, the suit was stuck against the wall—like that—about eight feet above the floor. That was in the big room where the cubicles are. When Kinmarten and Orca and I finally got the suit worked away from the wall, I expected frankly that we'd find half the body of the guard still inside. But he'd vanished."

Ryter cleared his throat. "Apparently," he said, "the creature drew the upper section of the suit into the wall by whatever means it uses, then stopped applying the transforming process to the metal, and simply moved on with the upper part of the suit and the man."

Quillan nodded. "That's what it looks like."

"But he had *two grenades!*" Orca burst out. "He had sprayguns! How could it get him that way?"

"Brother," Quillan said, "grenades won't help you much if you don't spot what's moving up behind you!"

Orca glared speechlessly at him. Ryter said, "All right! We've lost another man. We're not going to lose any more. We'll station no more guards on the fifth level. Now, get everyone who isn't on essential guard duty to the main room, and split 'em up into life-detector units. Five men to each detail, one to handle the detector, four to stay with him, guns out. If the thing comes back to this level, we want to have it spotted the instant it arrives. Orca, you stay here—and keep *your* gun out!"

The men filed out hurriedly. Ryter turned to Quillan. "Were you able to get the cubicle baited?"

Quillan nodded. "Kinmarten figured out how the thing should be set for the purpose. If the Hlat goes in after the sea beef, it's trapped. Of course, if the hunting it's been doing was for food, it mightn't be interested in the beef."

"We don't know," Ryter said, "that the hunting it's been doing was for food."

"No. Did you manage to get the control device from Cooms?"

Ryter shook his head. "He's refused to hand it over."

"If you tried to take it from him," Quillan said, "you might have a showdown on your hands."

"And if this keeps on," Ryter said, "I may prefer a showdown! Another few rounds of trouble with the Hlat, and the entire operation could blow up in our faces! The men aren't used to that kind of thing. It's shaken them up. If we've got to take care of the Brotherhood, I'd rather do it while I still have an organized group. Where did you leave Kinmarten, by the way?"

"He's back in the little room with his two guards," Quillan said.

"Well, he should be all right there. We can't spare—" Ryter's body jerked violently. "*What's that?*"

There had been a single thudding crash somewhere in the level. Then shouts and cursing.

"Main hall!" Quillan said. "Come on!"

The main hall was a jumble of excitedly jabbering Star men when they arrived there. Guns waved about, and the various groups were showing a marked tendency to stand with their backs toward one another and their faces toward the walls.

Ryter's voice rose in a shout that momentarily shut off the hubbub. "*What's going on here?*"

Men turned, hands pointed, voices babbled again. Someone nearby said sharply and distinctly, "... Saw it drop right out of the ceiling!" Farther down the hall, another group shifted aside enough to disclose it had been clustered about something which looked a little like the empty shell of a gigantic black beetle.

The missing section of the suit of space armor had been returned. But not its occupant.

Quillan moved back a step, turned, went back down the passage from which they had emerged, pulling the Miami Devil from its holster. Behind him the commotion continued; Ryter was shouting something about getting the life-detector units over there. Quillan went left down the first intersecting corridor, right again on the following one, keeping the gun slightly raised before him. Around the next corner, he saw the man on guard over the portal connecting the building levels facing him, gun pointed.

"What happened?" the guard asked shakily.

Quillan shook his head, coming up. "That thing got another one!"

The guard breathed, "By God!" and lowered his gun a little. Quillan raised his a little, the Miam Devil grunted, and the guard sighed and went down. Quillan went past him along the hall, stopped two doors beyond the portal and rapped on the locked door.

"Quillan here! Open up!"

The door opened a crack, and one of Kinmarten's guards looked out questioningly. Quillan shot him through the head, slammed on into the room across the collapsing body, saw the second guard wheeling toward him, shot again, and slid the gun back into the holster. Kinmarten, standing beside a table six feet away, right hand gripping a heavy marble ashtray, was staring at him in white-faced shock.

"Take it easy, chum!" Quillan said, turning toward him. "I—"

He ducked hurriedly as the ashtray came whirling through the air toward his head. An instant later, a large fist smacked the side of Kinmarten's jaw. The rest warden settled limply to the floor.

"Sorry to do that, pal," Quillan muttered, stooping over him. "Things are rough all over right now." He hauled Kinmarten upright, bent, and had the unconscious young man across his shoulder. The hall was still empty except for the body of the portal guard. Quillan laid Kinmarten on the carpet before the portal, hauled the guard off into the room, and pulled the door to the room shut behind him as he came out. Picking up Kinmarten, he stepped into the portal with him and jabbed the fifth level button. A moment later, he moved out into the small dim entry hall on the fifth level, the gun in his right hand again.

He stood there silently for some seconds, looking about him listening. The baited cubicle yawned widely at him from the center of the big room. Nothing seemed to be stirring. Kinmarten went back to the floor. Quillan moved over to the panel which concealed the other portal's mechanisms.

He had the outportal unsealed in considerably less than a minute this time, and slapped the panel gently back in place. He turned back to Kinmarten and started to bend down for him, then straightened quietly again, turning his head.

Had there been a flicker of shadowy motion just then at the edge of his vision, behind the big black cube of the Hlat's food locker? Quillan remained perfectly still, the Miam Devil ready and every sense straining for an indication that the thing was there—or approaching stealthily now, gliding behind the surfaces of floor or ceiling or walls like an underwater swimmer.

But half a minute passed and nothing else happened. He went down on one knee beside Kinmarten, the gun still in his right hand. With his left, he carefully wrestled the rest warden back up across his shoulder, came upright, moved three steps to the side, and disappeared in the outportal.

Reetal Destone unlocked the entry door to her suite and stepped hurriedly inside, letting the door slide shut behind her. She crossed the room to the ComWeb stand and switched on the playback. There was the succession of tinkling tones which indicated nothing had been recorded.

She shut the instrument off again, passing her tongue lightly over her lips. No further messages from Heraga....

And none from Quillan.

She shook her head, feeling a surge of sharp anxiety, glanced at her watch and told herself that, after all, less than two hours had passed since Quillan had gone into the Executive Block. Heraga reported there had been no indications of disturbance or excitement when he passed through the big entrance hall on his way out. So Quillan, at any rate, had succeeded in bluffing his way into the upper levels.

It remained a desperate play, at best.

Reetal went down the short passage to her bedroom. As she came into the room, her arms were caught from the side at the elbows, pulled suddenly and painfully together behind her. She stood still, frozen with shock.

"In a hurry, sweetheart?" Fluel's flat voice said.

Reetal managed a breathless giggle. "Duke! You startled me! How did you get in?"

She felt one hand move up her arm to her shoulder. Then she was swung about deftly and irresistibly, held pinned back against the wall, still unable to move her arms.

He looked at her a moment, asked, "Where are you hiding it this time?"

"Hiding what, Duke?"

"I've been told sweet little Reetal always carries a sweet little gun around with her in some shape or form or other."

Reetal shook her head, her eyes widening. "Duke, what's the matter? I...."

He let go of her suddenly, and his slap exploded against the side of her face. Reetal cried out, dropping her head between her hands. Immediately he had her wrists again, and her fingers were jerked away from the jeweled ornament in her hair.

"So that's where it is!" Fluel said. "Thought it might be. Don't get funny again now, sweetheart. Just stay quiet."

She stayed quiet, wincing a little as he plucked the glittering little device out of her hair. He turned it around in his fingers, examining it, smiled and slid it into an inside pocket, and took her arm again. "Let's go to the front room, Reetal," he said almost pleasantly. "We've got a few things to do."

A minute later, she was seated sideways on a lounge, her wrists fastened right and left to its armrests. The Duke placed a pocket recorder on the floor beside her. "This is a crowded evening, sweetheart," he remarked, "which is lucky for you in a way. We'll have to rush things along a little. I'll snap the recorder on in a minute so you can answer questions—No, keep quiet. Just listen very closely now, so you'll know what the right answers are. If you get rattled and gum things up, the Duke's going to get annoyed with you."

He sat down a few feet away from her, hitched his shoulders to straighten out the silver jacket, and lit a cigarette. "A little while after Bad News Quillan turned up just now," he went on, "a few things occurred to me. One of them was that a couple of years ago you and he were operating around Beldon at about the same time. I thought, well, maybe you knew each other; maybe not. And then—"

"Duke," Reetal said uncertainly, "just what are you talking about? I don't know—"

"Shut up." He reached over, tapped her knee lightly with his fingertips. "Of course, if you want to get slapped around, all right. Otherwise, don't interrupt again. Like I said, you're in luck; I don't have much time to spend here. You're getting off very easy. Now just listen."

"Bad News knew a lot about our operation and had a story to explain that. If the story was straight, we couldn't touch him. But I was wondering about the two of you happening to be here on the Star again at the same time. A team maybe, eh? But he didn't mention you as being in on the deal. So what was the idea?"

"And then, sweetheart, I remembered something else—and that tied it in. Know that little jolt people sometimes get when they're dropping off to sleep? Of course. Know another time they sometimes get it? When they're snapping back out of a Moment of Truth, eh? I remembered suddenly I'd felt a little jump like that while we were talking to-day. Might have been a reflex of some kind. Of course, it didn't occur to me at the time you could be pulling a lousy stunt like that on old Duke. Why take a chance on getting your neck broken?"

"But, sweetheart, that's the tie-in! Quillan hasn't told it straight. He's got no backing. He's on his own. There's no gang outside somewhere that knows all about our little deal. He got his information right here, from you. And you got it from dumb old Duke, eh?"

"Duke," Reetal said quite calmly, "can I ask just one question?"

He stared bleakly at her a moment, then grinned. "It's my night to be big-hearted, I guess. Go ahead."

"I'm not trying to argue. But it simply doesn't make sense. If I learned about this operation you're speaking of from you, what reason could I have to feed you Truth in the first place? There'd be almost a fifty-fifty chance that you'd spot it immediately. Why should I take such a risk? Don't you see?"

Fluel shrugged, dropped his cigarette and ground it carefully into the carpet with the tip of his shoe.

"You'll start answering those questions yourself almost immediately, sweetheart! Let's not worry about that now. Let me finish. Something happened to Movaine couple of hours ago. Nobody's fault. And something else happened to Marras Cooms just now. That puts me in charge of the operation

here. Nice, isn't it? When we found Cooms lying in the hall with a hole through his stupid head, I told Baldy Perk it looked like Bad News had thrown in with the Star boys and done it. Know Baldy? He's Cooms' personal gun. Not what you'd call bright, and he's mighty hot now about Cooms. I left him in charge on our level, with orders to get Quillan the next time he shows up there. Well and good. The boys know Bad News' rep too well to try asking him questions. They won't take chances with him. They'll just gun him down together the instant they see him."

He paused to scuff his shoe over the mark the cigarette had left on the carpet, went on, "But there's Nome Lancion now. He kind of liked Cooms, and he might get suspicious. When there's a sudden vacancy in the organization like that. Nome takes a good look first at the man next in line. He likes to be sure the facts are as stated.

"So now you know the kind of answers from you I want to hear go down on the recorder, sweetheart. And be sure they sound right. I don't want to waste time on replays. You and Quillan were here on the Star. You got some idea of what was happening, realized you were due to be vaporized along with the rest of them after we left. There was no way out of the jam for you unless you could keep the operation from being carried out. You don't, by the way, mention getting any of that information from me. I don't want Lancion to think I'm beginning to get dopey. You and Quillan just cooked up this story, and he managed to get into the Executive Block. The idea being to knock off as many of the leaders as he could, and mess things up."

Fluel picked up the recorder, stood up, and placed it on the chair. "That's all you have to remember. You're a smart girl; you can fill in the details any way you like. Now let's get started—"

She stared at him silently for an instant, a muscle beginning to twitch in her cheek. "If I do that," she said, "if I give you a story Nome will like, what happens next?"

Fluel shrugged. "Just what you're thinking happens next. You're a dead little girl right now, Reetal. Might as well get used to the idea. You'd be dead anyhow four, five hours from now, so that shouldn't make too much difference. What makes a lot of difference is just how unpleasant the thing can get."

She drew a long breath. "Duke, I—"

"You're stalling, sweetheart."

"Duke, give me a break. I really didn't know a thing about this. I—"

He looked down at her for a moment. "I gave you a break," he said. "You've wasted it. Now we'll try it the other way. If we work a few squeals into the recording, that'll make it more convincing to Lancion. He'll figure little Reetal's the type who wouldn't spill a thing like that without a little pressure." He checked himself, grinned. "And that reminds me. When you're talking for the record, use your own voice."

"My own voice?" she half whispered.

"Nome will remember what you sound like—and I've heard that voice imitations are part of your stock in trade. You might think it was cute if Nome got to wondering after you were dead whether that really had been you talking. Don't try it, sweetheart."

He brought a glove out of his jacket pocket, slipped it over his left hand, flexing his fingers to work it into position. Reetal's eyes fastened on the rounded metal tips capping thumb, forefinger and middle finger of the glove. Her face went gray.

"Duke," she said, "No—"

"Shut up." He brought out a strip of transparent plastic, moved over to her. The gloved hand went into her hair, gripped it, turned her face up. He laid the plastic gag lengthwise over her mouth, pressed it down and released it. Reetal closed her eyes.

"That'll keep it shut," he said. "Now—" His right hand clamped about the back of her neck, forcing her head down and forward almost to her knees. The gloved left hand brushed her hair forwards, then its middle finger touched the skin at a point just above her shoulder blades.

"Right there," Fluel said. The finger stiffened, drove down.

Reetal jerked violently, twisted, squirmed sideways, wrists straining against the grip of the armrests. Her breath burst out of her nostrils, followed by squeezed, whining noises. The metal-capped finger continued to grind savagely against the nerve center it had found.

"Thirty," Fluel said finally. He drew his hand back, pulled her upright again, peeled the gag away from her lips. "Only thirty seconds, sweetheart. Think you'd sooner play along now?"

Reetal's head nodded.

"Fine. Give you a minute to steady up. This doesn't really waste much time, you see—" He took up the recorder, sat down on the chair again, watching her. She was breathing raggedly and shallowly, eyes wide and incredulous. She didn't look at him.

The Duke lit another cigarette.

"Incidentally," he observed, "if you were stalling because you hoped old Bad News might show up, forget it. If the boys haven't gunned him down by now, he's tied up on a job the commodore gave him to do. He'll be busy another hour or two on that. He—"

He checked himself. A central section of the wall paneling across the room from him had just dilated open. Old Bad News stood in the concealed suite portal, Rest Warden Kinmarten slung across his shoulder.

Both men moved instantly. Fluel's long legs bounced him sideways out of the chair, right hand darting under his coat, coming out with a gun. Quillan turned to the left to get Kinmarten out of the way. The big Miam Devil seemed to jump into his hand. Both guns spoke together.

Fluel's gun thudded to the carpet. The Duke said, "Ah-aa-ah!" in a surprised voice, rolled up his eyes, and followed the gun down.

Quillan said, stunned, "He was fast! I felt that one parting my hair."

He became very solicitous then—after first ascertaining that Fluel had left the Executive Block unaccompanied, on personal business. He located a pain killer spray in Reetal's bedroom and applied it to the bruised point below the back of her neck. She was just beginning to relax gratefully, as the warm glow of the spray washed out the pain and the feeling of paralysis, when Kinmarten, lying on the carpet nearby, began to stir and mutter.

Quillan hastily put down the spray.

"Watch him!" he cautioned. "I'll be right back. If he sits up, yell. He's a bit wild at the moment. If he wakes up and sees the Duke lying there, he'll start climbing the walls."

"What—" Reetal began. But he was gone down the hall.

He returned immediately with a glass of water, went down on one knee beside Kinmarten, slid an arm under the rest warden's shoulder, and lifted him to a sitting position.

"Wake up, old pal!" he said loudly. "Come on, wake up! Got something good for you here—"

"What are you giving him?" Reetal asked, cautiously massaging the back of her neck.

"Knockout drops. I already had to lay him out once. We want to lock him up with his wife now, and if he comes to and tells her what's happened, they'll both be out of their minds by the time we come to let them out—"

He interrupted himself. Kinmarten's eyelids were fluttering. Quillan raised the glass to his lips. "Here you are, pal," he said in a deep, soothing voice. "Drink it! It'll make you feel a lot better."

Kinmarten swallowed obediently, swallowed again. His eyelids stopped fluttering. Quillan lowered him back to the floor.

"That ought to do it," he said.

"What," Reetal asked, "did happen? The Duke—"

"Tell you as much as I can after we get Kinmarten out of the way. I have to get back to the Executive Block. Things are sort of teetering on the edge there." He jerked his head at Fluel's body. "I want to know about him, too, of course. Think you can walk now?"

Reetal groaned. "I can try," she said.

They found Solvey Kinmarten dissolved in tears once more. She flung herself on her husband's body when Quillan placed him on the bed. "What have those *beasts* done to Brock?" she demanded fiercely.

"Nothing very bad," Quillan said soothingly. "He's, um, under sedation at the moment, that's all. We've got him away from them now, and he's safe ... look at it that way. You stay here and take care of him. We'll have the whole deal cleared up before morning, doll. Then you can both come out of hiding again." He gave her an encouraging wink.

"I'm so very grateful to both of you—"

"No trouble, really. But we'd better get back to work on the thing."

"Heck," Quillan said a few seconds later, as he and Reetal came out on the other side of the portal, "I feel like hell about those two. Nice little characters! Well, if the works blow up, they'll never know it."

"We'll know it," Reetal said meaningfully. "Start talking."

He rattled through a brief account of events in the Executive Block, listened to her report on the Duke's visit, scratched his jaw reflectively.

"That might help!" he observed. "They're about ready to jump down each other's throats over there right now. A couple more pushes—" He stood staring down at the Duke's body for a moment. Blood soiled the back of the silver jacket, seeping out from a tear above the heart area. Quillan bent down, got his hands under Fluel's armpits, hauled the body upright.

Reetal asked, startled, "What are you going to do with it?"

"Something useful, I think. And wouldn't that shock the Duke ... the first time he's been of any use to anybody. Zip through the Star's ComWeb directory, doll, and get me the call symbol for Level Four of the Executive Block!"

Solvey Kinmarten dimmed the lights a trifle in the bedroom, went back to Brock, rearranged the pillows under his head, and bent down to place her lips tenderly to the large bruises on his forehead and the side of his jaw. Then she brought a chair up beside the bed, and sat down to watch him.

Perhaps a minute later, there was a slight noise behind her. Startled, she glanced around, saw something huge, black and shapeless moving swiftly across the carpet of the room toward her.

Solvey quietly fainted.

"Sure you know what to say?" Quillan asked.

Reetal moistened her lips. "Just let me go over it in my mind once more." She was sitting on the floor, on the right side of the ComWeb stand, her face pale and intent, "You know," she said, "this makes me feel a little queasy somehow, Quillan! And suppose they don't fall for it?"

"They'll fall for it!" Quillan was on his knees in front of the stand, supporting Fluel's body, which was sprawled half across it, directly before the lit vision screen. An outflung arm hid the Duke's face from the screen. "You almost had *me* thinking I was listening to Fluel when you did the take-off of him this evening. A dying man can be expected to sound a little odd, anyway." He smiled at her encouragingly. "Ready now?"

Reetal nodded nervously, cleared her throat.

Quillan reached across Fluel tapped out Level Four's call symbol on the instrument, ducked back down below the stand. After a moment, there was a click.

Reetal produced a quavering, agonized groan. Somebody else gasped.

"*Duke!*" Baldy Perk's voice shouted. "What's happened?"

"Baldy Perk!" Quillan whispered quickly.

Reetal stammered hoarsely, "The c-c-commodore, Baldy! Shot me ... shot Marras! They're after ... Quillan ... now!"

"I thought Bad News...." Baldy sounded stunned.

"Was w-wrong, Baldy," Reetal croaked. "Bad News ... with us! Bad News ... pal! The c-c-comm—"

Beneath the ComWeb stand the palm of Quillan's right hand thrust abruptly up and forward. The stand tilted, went crashing back to the floor. Fluel's body lurched over with it. The vision screen shattered. Baldy's roaring question was cut off abruptly.

"Great stuff, doll!" Quillan beamed, helping Reetal to her feet. "You sent shudders down my back!"

"Down mine, too!"

"I'll get him out of here now. Ditch him in one of the shut-off sections. Then I'll get back to the Executive Block. If Ryter's thought to look into Kinmarten's room, they'll really be raving on both sides there now!"

"Is that necessary?" Reetal asked. "For you to go back, I mean. Somebody besides Fluel might have become suspicious of you by now."

"Ryter might," Quillan agreed. "He's looked like the sharpest of the lot right from the start. But we'll have to risk that. We've got all the making of a shooting war there now, but we've got to make sure it gets set off before somebody thinks of comparing notes. If I'm around, I'll keep jolting at their nerves."

"I suppose you're right. Now, our group—"

Quillan nodded. "No need to hold off on that any longer, the way things are moving. Get on another ComWeb and start putting out those Mayday messages right now! As soon as you've rounded the boys up—"

"That might," Reetal said, "take a little less than an hour."

"Fine. Then move them right into the Executive Block. With just a bit of luck, one hour from now should land them in the final stages of a beautiful battle on the upper levels. Give them my description and Ryter's, so we don't have accidents."

"Why Ryter's?"

"Found out he was the boy who took care of the bomb-planting detail. We want him alive. The others mightn't know where it's been tucked away. Heraga says the clerical staff and technicians in there are all wearing the white Star uniforms. Anyone else who isn't in one of those uniforms is fair

game—" He paused. "Oh, and tip them off about the Hlat!—God only knows what that thing will be doing when the ruckus starts."

"What about sending a few men in through the fifth level portal, the one you've unplugged?"

Quillan considered, shook his head. "No. Down on the ground level is where we want them. They'd have to portal there again from the fifth, and a portal is too easy to seal off and defend. Now let's get a blanket or something to tuck Fluel into. I don't want to feel conspicuous if I run into somebody on the way."

Quillan emerged cautiously from the fifth portal in the Executive Block a short while later, came to a sudden stop just outside it. In the big room beyond the entry hall, the door of the baited cubicle was closed, and the life-indicator on the door showed a bright steady green glow.

Quillan stared at it a moment, looking somewhat surprised, then went quietly into the room and bent to study the cubicle's instruments. A grin spread slowly over his face. The trap had been sprung. He glanced at the deep-rest setting and turned it several notches farther down.

"Happy dreams, Lady Pendrake!" he murmured. "That takes care of you. What an appetite! And now—"

As the Level Four portal dilated open before him, a gun blazed from across the hall. Quillan flung himself out and down, rolled to the side, briefly aware of a litter of bodies and tumbled furniture farther up the hall. Then he was flat on the carpet, gun out before him, pointing back at the overturned, ripped couch against the far wall from which the fire had come.

A hoarse voice bawled, "Bad News—hold it!"

Quillan hesitated, darting a glance right and left. Men lying about everywhere, the furnishings a shambles. "That you, Baldy?" he asked.

"Yeah," Baldy Perk half sobbed. "I'm hurt—"

"What happened?"

"*Star* gang jumped us. Portaled in here—spitballs and riot guns! Bad News, we're clean wiped out! Everyone that was on this level—"

Quillan stood up, holstering the gun, went over to the couch and moved it carefully away from the wall. Baldy was crouched behind it, kneeling on the blood-soaked carpet, gun in his right hand. He lifted a white face, staring eyes, to Quillan.

"Waitin' for 'em to come back," he muttered. "Man, I'm not for long! Got hit twice. Near passed out a couple of times already."

"What about your boys on guard downstairs?"

"Same thing there, I guess ... or they'd have showed up. They got Cooms and the Duke, too! Man, it all happened fast!"

"And the crew on the freighter?"

"Dunno about them."

"You know the freighter's call number?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure. Never thought of that," Baldy said wearily. He seemed dazed now.

"Let's see if you can stand."

Quillan helped the big man to his feet. Baldy hadn't bled too much outwardly, but he seemed to have estimated his own condition correctly. He wasn't for long. Quillan slid an arm under his shoulders.

"Where's a ComWeb?" he asked.

Baldy blinked about. "Passage there—" His voice was beginning to thicken.

The ComWeb was in the second room up the passage. Quillan eased Perk into the seat before it. Baldy's head lolled heavily forward, like a drunken man's. "What's the number?" Quillan asked.

Baldy reflected a few seconds, blinking owlishly at the instrument, then told him. Quillan tapped

out the number, flicked on the vision screen, then stood aside and back, beyond the screen's range.

"Yeah, Perk?" a voice said some seconds later. "Hey, *Perk* ... Perk, what's with ya?"

Baldy spat blood, grinned. "Shot—" he said.

"*What?*"

"Yeah." Baldy scowled, blinking. "Now, lessee—Oh, yeah. Star gang's gonna jump ya! Watch it!"

"*What?*"

"Yeah, watch—" Baldy coughed, laid his big head slowly down face forward on the ComWeb stand, and stopping moving.

"Perk! Man, wake up! Perk!"

Quillan quietly took out the gun, reached behind the stand and blew the ComWeb apart. He wasn't certain what the freighter's crew would make of the sudden break in the connection, but they could hardly regard it as reassuring. He made a brief prowl then through the main sections of the level. Evidence everywhere of a short and furious struggle, a struggle between men panicked and enraged almost beyond any regard for self-preservation. It must have been over in minutes. He found that the big hall portal to the ground level had been sealed, whether before or after the shooting he couldn't know. There would have been around twenty members of the Brotherhood on the level. None of them had lived as long as Baldy Perk, but they seemed to have accounted for approximately an equal number of the Star's security force first.

Five Star men came piling out of the fifth level portal behind him a minute or two later, Ryter in the lead. Orca behind Ryter. All five held leveled guns.

"You won't need the hardware," Quillan assured them. "It's harmless enough now. Come on in."

They followed him silently up to the cubicle, stared comprehendingly at dials and indicators. "The thing's back inside there, all right!" Ryter said. He looked at Quillan. "Is this where you've been all the time?"

"Sure, Where else?" The others were forming a half-circle about him, a few paces back.

"Taking quite a chance with that Hlat, weren't you?" Ryter remarked.

"Not too much. I thought of something." Quillan indicated the outportal in the hall. "I had my back against that. A portal's space-break, not solid matter. It couldn't come at me from behind. And if it attacked from any other angle"—he tapped the holstered Miam Devil lightly, and the gun in Orca's hand jerked upward a fraction of an inch—"There aren't many animals that can swallow more than a bolt or two from that baby and keep coming."

There was a moment's silence. Then Orca said thoughtfully, "That would work!"

"Did it see you?" Ryter asked.

"It couldn't have. First *I* saw of it, it was sailing out from that corner over there. It slammed in after that chunk of sea beef so fast, it shook the cubicle. And that was that." He grinned. "Well, most of our troubles should be over now!"

One of the men gave a brief, nervous laugh. Quillan looked at him curiously. "Something, chum?"

Ryter shook his head. "Something is right! Come on downstairs again, Bad News. This time we have news for you—"

The Brotherhood guards on the ground level had been taken by surprise and shot down almost without losses for the Star men. But the battle on the fourth level had cost more than the dead left up there. An additional number had returned with injuries that were serious enough to make them useless for further work.

"It's been expensive," Ryter admitted. "But one more attack by the Hlat would have left me with a panicked mob on my hands. If we'd realized it was going to trap itself—"

"I wasn't so sure that would work either," Quillan said. "Did you get Kinmarten back?"

"Not yet. The chances are he's locked up somewhere on the fourth level. Now the Hlat's out of the way, some of the men have gone back up there to look for him. If Cooms thought he was important enough to start a fight over, I want him back."

"How about the crew on the Beldon ship?" Quillan asked, "Have they been cleaned up?"

"No," Ryter said. "We'll have to do that now, of course."

"How many of them?"

"Supposedly twelve. And that's probably what it is."

"If they know or suspect what's happened," Quillan said, "twelve men can give a boarding party in a lock a remarkable amount of trouble."

Ryter shrugged irritably. "I know, but there isn't much choice. Lancion's bringing in the other group on the *Camelot*. We don't want to have to handle both of them at the same time."

"How are you planning to take the freighter?"

"When the search party comes back down, we'll put every man we can spare from guard duty here on the job. They'll be instructed to be careful about it ... if they can wind up the matter within the next several hours, that will be early enough. We can't afford too many additional losses now. But we should come out with enough men to take care of Lancion and handle the shipment of Hlats. And that's what counts."

"Like me to take charge of the boarding party?" Quillan inquired. "That sort of thing's been a kind of specialty of mine."

Ryter looked at him without much expression on his face. "I understand that," he said. "But perhaps it would be better if you stayed up here with us."

The search party came back down ten minutes later. They'd looked through every corner of the fourth level. Kinmarten wasn't there, either dead or alive. But one observant member of the group had discovered, first, that the Duke of Fluel was also not among those present, and, next that one of the four outportals on the level had been unsealed. The exit on which the portal was found to be set was in a currently unused hall in the General Office building on the other side of the Star. From that hall, almost every other section of the Star was within convenient portal range.

None of the forty-odd people working in the main control office on the ground level had actually witnessed any shooting; but it was apparent that a number of them were uncomfortably aware that something quite extraordinary must be going on. They were a well-disciplined group, however. An occasional uneasy glance toward one of the armed men lounging along the walls, some anxious faces, were the only noticeable indications of tension. Now and then, there was a brief, low-pitched conversation at one of the desks.

Quillan stood near the center of the office, Ryter and Orca a dozen feet from him on either side. Four Star guards were stationed along the walls. From the office one could see through a large doorspace cut through both sides of a hall directly into the adjoining transmitter room. Four more guards were in there. Aside from the men in the entrance hall and at the subspace portal, what was available at the moment of Ryter's security force was concentrated at this point.

The arrangement made considerable sense; and Quillan gave no sign of being aware that the eyes of the guards shifted to him a little more frequently than to any other point in the office, or that none of them had moved his hand very far away from his gun since they had come in here. But that also made sense. In the general tension area of the Executive Block's ground level, a specific point of tension—highly charged though undetected by the non-involved personnel—was the one provided by the presence of Bad News Quillan here. Ryter was more than suspicious by now; the opened portal on the fourth level, the disappearance of Kinmarten and the Duke, left room for a wide variety of speculations. Few of those speculations could be very favorable to Bad News. Ryter obviously preferred to let things stand as they were until the Beldon freighter was taken and the major part of his group had returned from the subspace sections of the Star. At that time, Bad News could expect to come in for some very direct questioning by the security chief.

The minutes dragged on. Under the circumstances, a glance at his watch could be enough to bring Ryter's uncertainties up to the explosion point, and Quillan also preferred to let things stand as they were for the moment. But he felt reasonably certain that over an hour had passed since he'd left Reetal; and so far there had been no hint of anything unusual occurring in the front part of the building. The murmur of voices in the main control office continued to eddy about him. There were indications that in the transmitter room across the hall messages had begun to be exchanged between the Star and the approaching liner.

A man sitting at a desk near Quillan stood up presently, went out into the hall and disappeared. A

short while later, the white-suited figure returned and picked up the interrupted work. Quillan's glance went over the clerk, shifted on. He felt something tighten up swiftly inside him. There was a considerable overall resemblance, but *that* wasn't the man who had left the office.

Another minute or two went by. Then two other uniformed figures appeared at the opening to the hall, a sparse elderly man, a blond girl. They stood there talking earnestly together for some seconds, then came slowly down the aisle toward Quillan. It appeared to be an argument about some detail of her work. The girl frowned, stubbornly shaking her head. Near Quillan they separated, started off into different sections of the office. The girl, glancing back, still frowning, brushed against Ryter. She looked up at him, startled.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Ryter scowled irritably, started to say something, suddenly appeared surprised. Then his eyes went blank and his knees buckled under him.

The clerk sitting at the nearby desk whistled shrilly.

Quillan wheeled, gun out and up, toward the wall behind him. The two guards there were still lifting their guns. The Miam Devil grunted disapprovingly twice, and the guards went down. Noise crashed from the hall ... heavy sporting rifles. He turned again, saw the two other guards stumbling backward along the far wall. Feminine screaming erupted around the office as the staff dove out of sight behind desks, instrument stands and filing cabinets. The elderly man stood above Orca, a sap in his hand and a please smile on his face.

In the hallway, four white-uniformed men had swung about and were pointing blazing rifles into the transmitter room. The racketing of the gunfire ended abruptly and the rifles were lowered again. The human din in the office began to diminish, turned suddenly into a shocked, strained silence. Quillan realized the blond girl was standing at his elbow.

"Did you get the rest of them?" he asked quickly, in a low voice.

"Everyone who was on this level," Reetal told him. "There weren't many of them."

"I know. But there's a sizable batch still in the subspace section. If we can get the bomb disarmed, we'll just leave them sealed up there. How long before you can bring Ryter around?"

"He'll be able to talk in five minutes."

Quillan had been sitting for some little while in a very comfortable chair in what had been the commodore's personal suite on the *Seventh Star*, broodingly regarding the image of the *Camelot* in a huge wall screen. The liner was still over two hours' flight away but would arrive on schedule. On the *Star*, at least in the normspace section, everything was quiet, and in the main control offices and in the transmitter room normal working conditions had been restored.

A room portal twenty feet away opened suddenly, and Reetal Destone stepped out.

"So there you are!" she observed.

Quillan looked mildly surprised, then grinned. "I'd hate to have to try to hide from you!" he said.

"Hm-m-m!" said Reetal. She smiled. "What are you drinking?"

He nodded at an open liquor cabinet near the screen. "Velladon was leaving some excellent stuff behind. Join me?"

"Hm-m-m." She went to the cabinet, looked over the bottles, made her selection and filled a glass. "One has the impression," she remarked, "that you *were* hiding from me."

"One does? I'd have to be losing my cotton-picking mind—"

"Not necessarily." Reetal brought the drink over to his chair, sat down on the armrest with it. "You might just have a rather embarrassing problem to get worked out before you give little Reetal a chance to start asking questions about it."

Quillan looked surprised. "What gave you that notion?"

"Oh," Reetal said, "adding things up gave me that notion.... Care to hear what the things were?"

"Go ahead, doll."

"First," said Reetal, "I understand that a while ago, after you'd first sent me off to do some little job

for you, you were in the transmitter room having a highly private—shielded and scrambled—conversation with somebody on board the *Camelot*."

"Why, yes," Quillan said. "I was talking to the ship's security office. They're arranging to have a Federation police boat pick up what's left of the commodore's boys and the Brotherhood in the subspace section.

"And that," said Reetal, "is where that embarrassing little problem begins. Next, I noticed, as I say, that you were showing this tendency to avoid a chance for a private talk between us. And after thinking about that for a little, and also about a few other things which came to mind at around that time, I went to see Ryter."

"Now why—?"

Reetal ran her fingers soothingly through his hair. "Let me finish, big boy. I found Ryter and Orca in a highly nervous condition. And do you know why they're nervous? They're convinced that some time before the *Camelot* gets here, you're going to do them both in."

"Hm-m-m," said Quillan.

"Ryter," she went on, "besides being nervous, is also very bitter. In retrospect, he says, it's all very plain what you've done here. You and your associates—a couple of tough boys named Hagreeady and Boltan, and others not identified—are also after these Hlats. The Duke made some mention of that, too, you remember. The commodore and Ryter bought the story you told them because a transmitter check produced the information that Hagreeady and Boltan had, in fact, left their usual work areas and gone off on some highly secret business about a month ago.

"Ryter feels that your proposition—to let your gang in on the deal for twenty per cent, or else—was made in something less than good faith. He's concluded that when you learned of the operation being planned by Velladon and the Brotherhood, you and your pals decided to obstruct them and take the Hlats for delivery to Yaco yourselves, without cutting anybody in. He figures that someone like Hagreeady or Boltan is coming in on the *Camelot* with a flock of sturdy henchmen to do just that. You, personally, rushed to the Seventh Star to interfere as much as you could here. Ryter admits reluctantly that you did an extremely good job of interfering. He says it's now obvious that every move you made since you showed up had the one purpose of setting the Star group and the Brotherhood at each other's throats. And now that they've practically wiped each other out, you and your associates can go on happily with your original plans.

"But, of course, you can't do that if Ryter and Orca are picked up alive by the Federation cops. The boys down in the subspace section don't matter; they're ordinary gunhands and all they know is that you were somebody who showed up on the scene. But Ryter could, and certainly would, talk—"

"Ah, he's too imaginative," Quillan said, taking a swallow of his drink. "I never heard of the Hlats before I got here. As I told you, I'm on an entirely different kind of job at the moment. I had to make up some kind of story to get an in with the boys, that's all."

"So you're not going to knock those two weasels off?"

"No such intentions. I don't mind them sweating about it till the Feds arrive, but that's it."

"What about Boltan and Hagreeady?"

"What about them? I did happen to know that if anyone started asking questions about those two, he'd learn that neither had been near his regular beat for close to a month."

"I'll bet!" Reetal said cryptically.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hm-m-m," she said. "Bad News Quillan! A really tough boy, for sure. You know, I didn't believe for an instant that you were after the Hlats—"

"Why not?"

Reetal said, "I've been on a couple of operations with you, and you'd be surprised how much I've picked up about you from time to time on the side. Swiping a shipment of odd animals and selling them to Yaco, that could be Bad News, in character. Selling a couple of hundred human beings—like Brock and Solvey Kinmarten—to go along with the animals to an outfit like Yaco would not be in character."

"So I have a heart of gold," Quillan said.

"So you fell all over your own big feet about half a minute ago!" Reetal told him. "Bad News Quillan

—with no interest whatsoever in the Hlats—still couldn't afford to let Ryter live to talk about him to the Feds, big boy!"

Quillan looked reflective for a moment. "Dirty trick!" he observed. "For that, you might freshen up my glass."

Reetal took both glasses over to the liquor cabinet, freshened them up, and settled down on the armrest of the chair again. "So there we're back to the embarrassing little problem," she said.

"Ryter?"

"No, idiot. We both know that Ryter is headed for Rehabilitation. Fifteen years or so of it, as a guess. The problem is little Reetal who has now learned a good deal more than she was ever intended to learn. Does she head for Rehabilitation, too?"

Quillan took a swallow of his drink and set the glass down again. "Are you suggesting," he inquired, "that I might be, excuse the expression, a cop?"

Reetal patted his head. "Bad News Quillan! Let's look back at his record. What do we find? A shambles, mainly. Smashed-up organizations, outfits, gangs. Top-level crooks with suddenly vacant expressions and unexplained holes in their heads. Why go on? The name is awfully well earned! And nobody realizing anything because the ones who do realize it suddenly ... well, where *are* Boltan Hagready at the moment."

Quillan sighed. "Since you keep bringing it up—Hagready played it smart, so he's in Rehabilitation. Be cute if Ryter ran into him there some day. Pappy Boltan didn't want to play it smart. I'm not enough of a philosopher to make a guess at where he might be at present. But I knew he wouldn't be talking."

"All right," Reetal said, "we've got that straight. Bad News is Intelligence of some kind. Federation maybe, or maybe one of the services. It doesn't matter, really, I suppose. Now, what about me?"

He reached out and tapped his glass with a fingertip. "That about you, doll. You filled it. I'm drinking it. I may not think quite as fast as you do, but I still think. Would I take a drink from a somewhat lawless and very clever lady who really believed I had her lined up for Rehabilitation? Or who'd be at all likely to blab out something that would ruin an old pal's reputation?"

Reetal ran her fingers through his hair again. "I noticed the deal with the drink," she said. "I guess I just wanted to hear you say it. You don't tell on me, I don't tell on you. Is that it?"

"That's it," Quillan said. "What Ryter and Orca want to tell the Feds doesn't matter. It stops there, the Feds will have the word on me before they arrive. By the way, did you go wake up the Kinmartens yet?"

"Not yet," Reetal said. "Too busy getting the office help soothed down and back to work."

"Well, lets finish these drinks and go do that, then. The little doll's almost bound to be asleep by now, but she might still be sitting there biting nervously at her pretty knuckles."

Major Hesler Quillan of Space Scout Intelligence, was looking unhappy. "We're still searching for them everywhere," he explained to Klayung, "but it's a virtual certainty that the Hlat got them shortly before it was trapped."

Klayung, a stringy, white-haired old gentleman, was an operator of the Psychology Service, in charge of the shipment of Hlats the *Camelot* had brought in. He and Quillan were waiting in the vestibule of the Seventh Star's rest cubicle vaults for Lady Pendrake's cubicle to be brought over from the Executive Block.

Klayung said reflectively, "Couldn't the criminals with who you were dealing here have hidden the couple away somewhere?"

Quillan shook his head. "There's no way they could have located them so quickly. I made half a dozen portal switches when I was taking Kinmarten to the suite. It would take something with a Hlat's abilities to follow me over that route and stay undetected. And it must be an unusually cunning animal to decide to stay out of sight until I'd led it where it wanted to go."

"Oh, they're intelligent enough," Klayung agreed absently. "Their average basic I.Q. is probably

higher than that of human beings. A somewhat different type of mentality, of course. Well, when the cubicle arrives, I'll question the Hlat and we'll find out."

Quillan looked at him. "Those control devices make it possible to hold two-way conversations with the things?"

"Not exactly," Klayung said. "You see, major, the government authorities who were concerned with the discovery of the Hlats realized it would be almost impossible to keep some information about them from getting out. The specimen which was here on the Star has been stationed at various scientific institutions for the past year; a rather large number of people were involved in investigating it and experimenting with it. In consequence, several little legends about them have been deliberately built up. The legends aren't entirely truthful, so they help to keep the actual facts about the Hlats satisfactorily vague.

"The Hlat-talker is such a legend. Actually, the device does nothing. The Hlats respond to telepathic stimuli, both among themselves and from other beings, eventually begin to correlate such stimuli with the meanings of human speech."

"Then you—" Quillan began.

"Yes. Eltak, their discoverer, was a fairly good natural telepath. If he hadn't been abysmally lazy, he might have been very good at it. I carry a variety of the Service's psionic knick-knacks about with me, which gets me somewhat comparable results."

He broke off as the vestibule portal dilated widely. Lady Pendrake's cubicle floated through, directed by two gravity crane operators behind it. Klayung stood up.

"Set it there for the present, please," he directed the operators. "We may call for you later if it needs to be moved again."

He waited until the portal had closed behind the men before walking over to the cubicle. He examined the settings and readings at some length.

"Hm-m-m, yes," he said, straightening finally. His expression became absent for a few seconds; then he went on. "I'm beginning to grasp the situation, I believe. Let me tell you a few things about the Hlats, major. For one, they form quite pronounced likes and dislikes. Eltak, for example, would have been described by most of his fellow men as a rather offensive person. But the Hlats actually became rather fond of him during the fifteen or so years he lived on their island.

"That's one point. The other has to do with their level of intelligence. We discovered on the way out here that our charges had gained quite as comprehensive an understanding of the functioning of the cubicles that had been constructed for them as any human who was not a technical specialist might do. And—"

He interrupted himself, stood rubbing his chin for a moment.

"Well, actually," he said, "that should be enough to prepare you for a look inside the Hlat's cubicle."

Quillan gave him a somewhat surprised glance. "I've been told it's ugly as sin," he remarked. "But I've seen some fairly revolting looking monsters before this."

Klayung coughed. "That's not exactly what I meant," he said. "I ... well, let's just open the thing up. Would you mind, major?"

"Not at all." Quillan stepped over to the side of the cubicle, unlocked the door switch and pulled it over. They both moved back a few feet before the front of the cubicle. A soft humming came for some seconds from the door's mechanisms; then it suddenly swung open. Quillan stooped to glance inside, straightened instantly again, hair bristling.

"*Where is it?*" he demanded, the Miam Devil out in his hand.

Klayung looked at him thoughtfully. "Not very far away, I believe. But I can assure you, major, that it hasn't the slightest intention of attacking us—or anybody else—at present."

Quillan grunted, looked back into the cubicle. At the far end, the Kinmartens lay side by side, their faces composed. They appeared to be breathing regularly.

"Yes," Klayung said, "they're alive and unharmed." He rubbed his chin again. "And I think it would be best if we simply closed the cubicle now. Later we can call a doctor over from the hospital to put them under sedation before they're taken out. They've both had thoroughly unnerving experiences, and it would be advisable to awaken them gradually to avoid emotional shock."

He moved over to the side of the cubicle, turned the door switch back again. "And now for the rest

of it," he said. "We may as well sit down again, major. This may take a little time."

"Let's look at the thing for a moment from the viewpoint of the Hlat," he resumed when he was once more comfortably seated. "Eltak's death took it by surprise. It hadn't at that point grasped what the situation in the Executive Block was like. It took itself out of sight for the moment, killing one of the gang leaders in the process, then began prowling about the various levels of the building, picking up information from the minds and conversation of the men it encountered. In a fairly short time, it learned enough to understand what was planned by the criminals; and it arrived at precisely your own conclusion ... that it might be possible to reduce and demoralize the gangs to the extent that they would no longer be able to carry out their plan. It began a systematic series of attacks on them with that end in mind.

"But meanwhile you had come into the picture. The Hlat was rather puzzled by your motive at first because there appeared to be an extraordinary degree of discrepancy between what you were saying and what you were thinking. But after observing your activities for a while, it began to comprehend what you were trying to do. It realized that your approach was more likely to succeed than its own, and that further action on its side might interfere with your plans. But there remained one thing for it to do.

"I may tell you in confidence, major, that another legend which has been spread about these Hlats is their supposed inability to escape from the cubicles. Even their attendants are supplied with this particular bit of misinformation. Actually, the various force fields in the cubicles don't hamper them in the least. The cubicles are designed simply to protect the Hlats and keep them from being seen; and rest cubicles, of course, can be taken anywhere without arousing undue curiosity.

"You mentioned that the Kinmartens very likable young people. The Hlat had the same feeling about them; they were the only human beings aside from Eltak with whose minds it had become quite familiar. There was no assurance at this point that the plans to prevent a bomb from being exploded in the Star would be successful, and the one place where human beings could hope to survive such an explosion was precisely the interior of the Hlat's cubicle, which had been constructed to safeguard its occupant against any kind of foreseeable accident.

"So the Hlat sprang your cubicle trap, removed the bait, carried the Kinmartens inside, and whipped out of the cubicle again before the rest current could take effect on it. It concluded correctly that everyone would decide it had been recaptured. After that, it moved about the Executive Block, observing events there and prepared to take action again if that appeared to be advisable. When you had concluded your operation successfully, it remained near the cubicle, waiting for me to arrive."

Quillan shook his head. "That's quite an animal!" he observed after some seconds. "You say, it's in our general vicinity now?"

"Yes," Klayung said. "It followed the cubicle down here, and has been drifting about the walls of the vestibule while we ... well, while I talked."

"Why doesn't it show itself?"

Klayung cleared his throat. "For two reasons," he said. "One is that rather large gun you're holding on your knees. It saw you use it several times, and after all the shooting in the Executive Block, you see—"

Quillan slid the Miam Devil into its holster. "Sorry," he said. "Force of habit, I guess. Actually, of course, I've understood for some minutes now that I wasn't ... well, what's the other reason?"

"I'm afraid," Klayung said, "that you offended it with your remark about its appearance. Hlats may have their share of vanity. At any rate, it seems to be sulking."

"Oh," said Quillan. "Well, I'm sure," he went on rather loudly, "that it understands I received the description from a prejudiced source. I'm quite willing to believe it was highly inaccurate."

"Hm-m-m," said Klayung. "That seems to have done it, major. The wall directly across from us—"

Something like a ripple passed along the side wall of the vestibule. Then the wall darkened suddenly, turned black. Quillan blinked, and the Hlat came into view. It hung, spread out like a spider, along half the length of the vestibule wall. Something like a huge, hairy amoeba in overall appearance, though the physical structures under the coarse, black pelt must be of very unamoeba-like complexity. No eyes were in sight, but Quillan had the impression of being regarded steadily. Here and there, along the edges and over the surface of the body, were a variety of

flexible extensions.

Quillan stood up, hitched his gun belt into position, and started over toward the wall.

"Lady Pendrake," he said, "honored to meet you. Could we shake hands?"

The End

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