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Title: The Cosmic Computer

Author: H. Beam Piper

Release date: March 3, 2007 [eBook #20727]

Most recently updated: January 1, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Bethanne M. Simms, Jason Isbell, and the  
Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

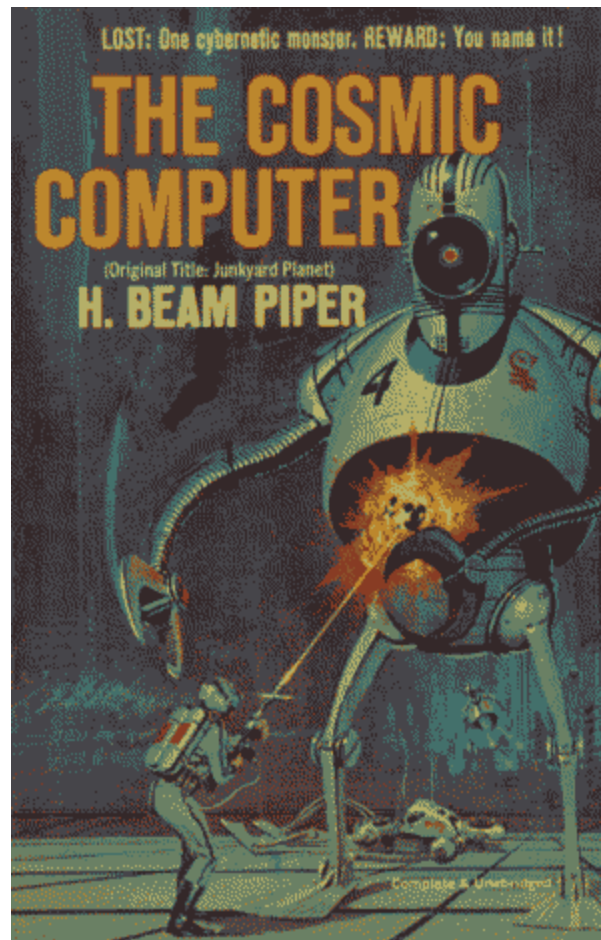
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Conn Maxwell told them: "There are incredible things still undiscovered; most of the important [Pg 1] installations were built in duplicate as a precaution against space attack. I know where all of them are.

"But I could find nothing, not one single word, about any giant strategic planning computer called Merlin!"

Nevertheless the leading men of the planet didn't believe him. They couldn't, for the search for Merlin had become their abiding obsession. Merlin meant everything to them: power, pleasures, and profits unlimited.

Conn had known they'd never believe him, and so he had a trick or two up his space-trained sleeve that might outwit even their fabled Cosmic Computer ... if they dared accept his challenge.

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**H. BEAM PIPER** is rather enigmatic where his personal statistics are concerned. It may be stated that he lives in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, that he is an expert on the history and use of hand weapons, that he has been writing and selling science-fiction for many years to the leading magazines, and that he is highly rated among readers for his skill and imagination. He has had several novels published, including mysteries and juveniles.

His previous appearances in Ace Books include two novels written in collaboration with John J. McGuire: CRISIS IN 2140 (D-227) and A PLANET FOR TEXANS (D-299), and a longer entirely self-authored novel SPACE VIKING (F-225).

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# THE COSMIC COMPUTER

(Original Title: Junkyard Planet)

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New York, N.Y. 10036

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THE COSMIC COMPUTER (JUNKYARD PLANET)

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## I

Thirty minutes to Litchfield.

Conn Maxwell, at the armor-glass front of the observation deck, watched the landscape rush out of the horizon and vanish beneath the ship, ten thousand feet down. He thought he knew how an hourglass must feel with the sand slowly draining out.

It had been six months to Litchfield when the *Mizar* lifted out of La Plata Spaceport and he watched Terra dwindle away. It had been two months to Litchfield when he boarded the *City of Asgard* at the port of the same name on Odin. It had been two hours to Litchfield when the *Countess Dorothy* rose from the airship dock at Storisende. He had had all that time, and now it was gone, and he was still unprepared for what he must face at home.

Thirty minutes to Litchfield.

The words echoed in his mind as though he had spoken them aloud, and then, realizing that he never addressed himself as sir, he turned. It was the first mate. [Pg 6]

He had a clipboard in his hand, and he was wearing a Terran Federation Space Navy uniform of forty years, or about a dozen regulation-changes, ago. Once Conn had taken that sort of thing for granted. Now it was obtruding upon him everywhere.

"Thirty minutes to Litchfield, sir," the first officer repeated, and gave him the clipboard to check the luggage list. Valises, two; trunks, two; microbook case, one. The last item fanned a small flicker of anger, not at any person, not even at himself, but at the whole infernal situation. He nodded.

"That's everything. Not many passengers left aboard, are there?"

"You're the only one, first class, sir. About forty farm laborers on the lower deck." He dismissed them as mere cargo. "Litchfield's the end of the run."

"I know. I was born there."

The mate looked again at his name on the list and grinned.

"Sure; you're Rodney Maxwell's son. Your father's been giving us a lot of freight lately. I guess I don't have to tell you about Litchfield."

"Maybe you do. I've been away for six years. Tell me, are they having labor trouble now?"

"Labor trouble?" The mate was surprised. "You mean with the farm-tramps? Ten of them for every job, if you call that trouble."

"Well, I noticed you have steel gratings over the gangway heads to the lower deck, and all your crewmen are armed. Not just pistols, either."

"Oh. That's on account of pirates."

"Pirates?" Conn echoed.

"Well, I guess you'd call them that. A gang'll come aboard, dressed like farm-tramps; they'll have tommy guns and sawed-off shotguns in their bindles. When the ship's airborne and out of reach of help, they'll break out their guns and take her. Usually kill all the crew and passengers. They don't like to leave live witnesses," the mate said. "You heard about the *Harriet Barne*, didn't you?"

She was Transcontinent & Overseas, the biggest contragravity ship on the planet.

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"They didn't pirate her, did they?"

The mate nodded. "Six months ago; Blackie Perales' gang. There was just a tag end of a radio call, that ended in a shot. Time the Air Patrol got to her estimated position it was too late. Nobody's ever seen ship, officers, crew or passengers since."

"Well, great Ghu; isn't the Government doing anything about it?"

"Sure. They offered a big reward for the pirates, dead or alive. And there hasn't been a single case of piracy inside the city limits of Storisende," he added solemnly.

The Calder Range had grown to a sharp blue line on the horizon ahead, and he could see the late afternoon sun on granite peaks. Below, the fields were bare and brown, and the woods were autumn-tinted. They had been green with new foliage when he had last seen them, and the wine-melon fields had been in pink blossom. Must have gotten the crop in early, on this side of the mountains. Maybe they were still harvesting, over in the Gordon Valley. Or maybe this gang below was going to the wine-pressing. Now that he thought of it, he'd seen a lot of cask staves going aboard at Storisende.

Yet there seemed to be less land under cultivation now than six years ago. He could see squares of bracken and low brush that had been melon fields recently, among the new forests that had grown up in the past forty years. The few stands of original timber towered above the second growth like hills; those trees had been there when the planet had been colonized.

That had been two hundred years ago, at the beginning of the Seventh Century, Atomic Era. The name "Poictesme" told that—Surromanticist Movement, when they were rediscovering James Branch Cabell. Old Genji Gartner, the scholarly and half-piratical space-rover whose ship had been the first to enter the Trisystem, had been devoted to the romantic writers of the Pre-Atomic Era. He had named all the planets of the Alpha System from the books of Cabell, and those of Beta from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and those of Gamma from Rabelais. Of course, the camp village at his first landing site on this one had been called Storisende. [Pg 8]

Thirty years later, Genji Gartner had died there, after seeing Storisende grow to a metropolis and Poictesme become a Member Republic in the Terran Federation. The other planets were uninhabitable except in airtight dome cities, but they were rich in minerals. Companies had been formed to exploit them. No food could be produced on any of them except by carniculture and hydroponic farming, and it had been cheaper to produce it naturally on Poictesme. So Poictesme had concentrated on agriculture and had prospered. At least, for about a century.

Other colonial planets were developing their own industries; the manufactured goods the Gartner Trisystem produced could no longer find a profitable market. The mines and factories on Jurgen and Koshchei, on Britomart and Calidore, on Panurge and the moons of Pantagruel closed, and the factory workers went away. On Poictesme, the offices emptied, the farms contracted, forests reclaimed fields, and the wild game came back.

Coming toward the ship out of the east, now, was a vast desert of crumbling concrete—landing fields and parade grounds, empty barracks and toppling sheds, airship docks, stripped gun emplacements and missile-launching sites. These were more recent, and dated from Poictesme's second hectic prosperity, when the Gartner Trisystem had been the advance base for the Third Fleet-Army Force, during the System States War.

It had lasted twelve years. Millions of troops were stationed on or routed through Poictesme. The mines and factories reopened for war production. The Federation spent trillions on trillions of sols, piled up mountains of supplies and equipment, left the face of the world cluttered with installations. Then, without warning, the System States Alliance collapsed, the rebellion ended, and the scourge of peace fell on Poictesme.

The Federation armies departed. They took the clothes they stood in, their personal weapons, and a few souvenirs. Everything else was abandoned. Even the most expensive equipment had been worth less than the cost of removal.

The people who had grown richest out of the War had followed, taking their riches with them. For the next forty years, those who remained had been living on leavings. On Terra, Conn had told his friends that his father was a prospector, leaving them to interpret that as one who searched, say, for uranium. Rodney Maxwell found quite a bit of uranium, but he got it by taking apart the warheads of missiles.

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Now he was looking down on the granite spines of the Calder Range; ahead the misty Gordon Valley sloped and widened to the north. Twenty minutes to Litchfield, now. He still didn't know what he was going to tell the people who would be waiting for him. No; he knew that; he just didn't know how. The ship swept on, ten miles a minute, tearing through thin puffs of cloud. Ten minutes. The Big Bend was glistening redly in the sunlit haze, but Litchfield was still hidden inside its curve. Six. Four. The *Countess Dorothy* was losing speed and altitude. Now he could see it, first a blur and then distinctly. The Airlines Building, so thick as to look squat for all its height. The yellow block of the distilleries under their plume of steam. High Garden Terrace; the Mall.

Moment by moment, the stigmata of decay became more evident. Terraces empty or littered with rubbish; gardens untended and choked with wild growth; blank-staring windows, walls splotched with lichens. At first, he was horrified at what had happened to Litchfield in six years. Then he realized that the change had been in himself. He was seeing it with new eyes, as it really was.

The ship came in five hundred feet above the Mall, and he could see cracked pavements sprouting grass, statues askew on their pedestals, waterless fountains. At first he thought one of them was playing, but what he had taken for spray was dust blowing from the empty basin. There was a thing about dusty fountains, some poem he'd read at the University.

*The fountains are dusty in the Graveyard of Dreams;  
The hinges are rusty, they swing with tiny screams.*

Was Poictesme a Graveyard of Dreams? No; Junkyard of Empire. The Terran Federation had impoverished a hundred planets, devastated a score, actually depopulated at least three, to keep the System States Alliance from seceding. It hadn't been a victory. It had only been a lesser defeat.

There was a crowd, almost a mob, on the dock; nearly everybody in topside Litchfield. He spotted old Colonel Zareff, with his white hair and plum-brown skin, and Tom Brangwyn, the town marshal, red-faced and bulking above everybody else. Kurt Fawzi, the mayor, well to the front. Then he saw his father and mother, and his sister Flora, and waved to them. They waved back, and then everybody was waving. The gangway-port opened, and the Academy band struck up, enthusiastically if inexpertly, as he descended to the dock.

His father was wearing a black suit with a long coat, cut to the same pattern as the one he had worn six years ago. Blackout curtain cloth. It was fairly new, but the coat had begun to acquire a permanent wrinkle across the right hip, over the pistol butt. His mother's dress was new, and so was Flora's, made for the occasion. He couldn't be sure just which of the Federation Armed Forces had provided the material, but his father's shirt was Med Service sterilon.

Ashamed to be noticing things like that, he clasped his father's hand, kissed his mother, embraced his sister. There were a few, but very few, gray threads in his father's mustache; a few more squint-wrinkles around the eyes. His mother's hair was all gray, now, and she was heavier. She seemed shorter, but that would be because he'd grown a few inches in the last six years. For a moment, he was surprised that Flora actually looked younger. Then he realized that to seventeen, twenty-three is practically middle age, but to twenty-three, twenty-nine is almost contemporary. He noticed the glint on her left hand and caught it to look at the ring.

"Hey! Zarathustra sunstone! Nice," he said. "Where is he, Sis?"

He'd never met her fiancé; Wade Lucas hadn't come to Litchfield to practice medicine until the year after he'd gone to Terra. [Pg 11]

"Oh, emergency," Flora said. "Obstetrical case; that won't wait on anything. In Tramptown, of course. But he'll be at the party.... Oops, I shouldn't have said that; that's supposed to be a surprise."

"Don't worry; I'll be surprised," he promised.

Then Kurt Fawzi was pushing forward, holding out his hand. Thinner, and grayer, but just as effusive as ever.

"Welcome home, Conn. Judge, shake hands with him and tell him how glad we all are to see him back.... Now, Franz, put away the recorder; save the interview for the *Chronicle* till later. Ah, Professor Kellton; one pupil Litchfield Academy can be proud of!"

He shook hands with them: Judge Ledue, Franz Veltrin, old Professor Dolf Kellton. They were all happy; how much, he wondered, because he was Conn Maxwell, Rodney Maxwell's son, home from Terra, and how much because of what they hoped he'd tell them. Kurt Fawzi, edging him aside, was the first to speak of it.

"Conn, what did you find out?" he whispered. "Do you know where it is?"

He stammered, then saw Tom Brangwyn and Colonel Klem Zareff approaching, the older man tottering on a silver-headed cane and the younger keeping pace with him. Neither of them had been born on Poictesme. Tom Brangwyn had always been reticent about where he came from, but Hathor was a good guess. There had been political trouble on Hathor twenty years ago; the losers had had to get off-planet in a hurry to dodge firing squads. Klem Zareff never was reticent about his past. He came from Ashmodai, one of the System States planets, and he had commanded a regiment, and finally a division that had been blasted down to less than regimental strength, in the Alliance Army. He always wore a little rosette of System States black and green on his coat.

"Hello, boy," he croaked, extending a hand. "Good to see you again."

"It sure is, Conn," the town marshal agreed, then lowered his voice. "Find out anything definite?"

"We didn't have much time, Conn," Kurt Fawzi said, "but we've arranged a little celebration for you. We'll ~~put it~~ <sup>stage it</sup> with a dinner at Senta's."

"You couldn't have done anything I'd have liked better, Mr. Fawzi. I'd have to have a meal at Senta's before I'd really feel at home."

"Well, it'll be a couple of hours. Suppose we all go up to my office, in the meantime. Give the ladies a chance to fix up for the party, and have a little drink and a talk together."

"You want to do that, Conn?" his father asked. There was an odd undernote of anxiety, or reluctance, in his voice.

"Yes, of course. I'd like that."

His father turned to speak to his mother and Flora. Kurt Fawzi was speaking to his wife, interrupting himself to shout instructions to some laborers who were bringing up a contragravity skid. Conn turned to Colonel Zareff.

"Good melon crop this year?" he asked.

The old Rebel cursed. "Gehenna of a big crop; we're up to our necks in melons. This time next year we'll be washing our feet in brandy."

"Hold onto it and age it; you ought to see what they charge for a drink of Poictesme brandy on Terra."

"This isn't Terra, and we aren't selling it by the drink," Colonel Zareff said. "We're selling it at Storisende Spaceport, for what the freighter captains pay us. You've been away too long, Conn. You've forgotten what it's like to live in a poor-house."

The cargo was coming off, now. Cask staves, and more cask staves. Zareff swore bitterly at the sight, and then they started toward the wide doors of the shipping floor, inside the Airlines Building. Outgoing cargo was beginning to come out; casks of brandy, of course, and a lot of boxes and crates, painted light blue and bearing the yellow trefoil of the Third Fleet-Army Force and the eight-pointed red star of Ordnance. Cases of rifles; square boxes of ammunition; crated auto-cannon. Conn turned to his father.

"This our stuff?" he asked. "Where did you dig it?"

Rodney Maxwell laughed. "You know the old Tenth Army Headquarters, over back of Snagtooth, in the Calders? Everybody knows that was cleaned out years ago. Well, always take a second look at these things everybody knows. Ten to one they're not so. It always bothered me that nobody found any underground attack-shelters. I took a second look, and sure enough, I found them, right underneath, mined out of the solid rock. Conn, you'd be surprised at what I found there."

"Where are you going to sell that stuff?" he asked, pointing at a passing skid. "There's enough combat equipment around now to outfit a private army for every man, woman and child in Poictesme."

"Storisende Spaceport. The freighter captains buy it, and sell it on some of the planets that were colonized right before the War and haven't gotten industrialized yet. I'm clearing about two hundred sols a ton on it."

The skid at which he had pointed was loaded with cases of M504 submachine guns. Even used, one was worth fifty sols. Allowing for packing weight, his father was selling those tommy guns for less than a good café on Terra got for one drink of Poictesme brandy.

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## II

He had been in Kurt Fawzi's office before, once or twice, with his father; he remembered it as a dim, quiet place of genteel conviviality and rambling conversation. None of the lights were bright, and the walls were almost invisible in the shadows. As they entered, Tom Brangwyn went to the long table and took off his belt and holster, laying it down. One by one, the others unbuckled their weapons and added them to the pile. Klem Zareff's cane went on the table with his pistol; there was a sword inside it.

That was something else he was seeing with new eyes. He hadn't started carrying a gun when he had left for Terra, and he was wondering, now, why any of them bothered to. Why, there wouldn't be a shooting a year in Litchfield, if you didn't count the Trampowners, and they stayed south of the docks and off the top level.

Or perhaps that was just it. Litchfield was peaceful because everybody was prepared to keep it that way. It certainly wasn't because of anything the Planetary Government did to maintain order.



Now Brangwyn was setting out glasses, filling a pitcher from a keg in the corner of the room. The last time Conn had been here, they'd given him a glass of wine, and he'd felt very grown-up because they didn't water it for him.

"Well, gentlemen," Kurt Fawzi was saying, "let's have a toast to our returned friend and new associate. Conn, we're all anxious to hear what you've found out, but even if you didn't learn anything, we're still happy to have you back with us. Gentlemen; to our friend and neighbor. Welcome home, Conn!"

"Well, it's wonderful to be back, Mr. Fawzi," he began.

"Here, none of this mister foolishness; you're one of us, now, Conn. And drink up, everybody. We have plenty of brandy, if we don't have anything else."

"You can say that again, Kurt." That was one of the distillery people; he'd remember the name in a moment. "When this new crop gets pressed and fermented...."

"I don't know where in Gehenna I'm going to vat mine till it ferments," Klem Zareff said.

"Or why," another planter added. "Lorenzo, what are you going to be paying for wine?"

Lorenzo Menardes; that was the name. The distiller said he was worrying about what he'd be able to get for brandy.

"Oh, please," Fawzi interrupted. "Not today; not when our boy's home and is going to tell us how we can solve all our problems."

"Yes, Conn." That was Morgan Gatworth, the lawyer. "You did find out where Merlin is, didn't you?"

That set them all off. He was still holding his drink; he downed it in one gulp, barely tasting it, and handed the glass to Tom Brangwyn for a refill, and caught a frown on his father's face. One did not gulp drinks in Kurt Fawzi's office.

Well, neither did one blast everybody's hopes with half a dozen words, and that was what he was trying to force himself to do. He wanted to blurt out the one quick sentence and get it over with, but the words wouldn't come out of his throat. He lowered the second drink by half; the brandy was beginning to warm him and dissolve the cold lump in his stomach. Have to go easy, though. He wasn't used to this kind of drinking, and he wanted to stay sober enough to talk sense until he'd told them what he had to.

"I hope," he said, "that you don't expect me to show you the cross on the map, where the computer is buried."

All the eyes around him began to look troubled. Most of them had been expecting precisely that. His father was watching him anxiously.

"But it's still here on Poictesme, isn't it?" one of the melon planters asked. "They didn't take it away with them?"

"Most of you gentlemen," he said, "contributed to sending me to school on Terra, to study cybernetics and computer theory. It wouldn't do us any good to find Merlin if none of us could operate it. Well, I've done that. I can use any known type of computer, and train assistants. After I graduated, I was offered a junior instructorship to computer physics at the University."

"You didn't mention that, son," his father said.

"The letter would have come on the same ship I did. Besides, I didn't think it was very important."

"I think it is." There was a catch in old Dolf Kellton's voice. "One of my boys from the Academy offered a place on the faculty of the University of Montevideo, on Terra!" He finished his drink and held out his glass for more, something he almost never did.

"Conn means," Kurt Fawzi explained, "that it had nothing to do with Merlin."

All right; now tell them the truth.

"I was also to find out anything I could about a secret giant computer used during the War by the Third Fleet-Army Force, code-named Merlin. I went over all the records available to the public; I used your letter, Professor, and the head of our Modern History department secured me access to non-public material, some of it still classified. For one thing, I have locations and maps and plans of every Federation installation built here between 842 and 854, the whole period of the War." He turned to his father. "There are incredible things still undiscovered; most of the important installations were built in duplicate, sometimes triplicate, as a precaution against space attack. I know where all of them are."

"Space attack!" Klem Zareff was indignant. "There never was a time we could have attacked Poictesme. Even if we'd had the ships, we were fighting a purely defensive war. Aggression was no part of our policy—"

He interrupted: "Excuse me, Colonel. The point I was trying to make is that, with all I was able to learn, I could find nothing, not one single word, about any giant strategic planning computer called Merlin, or any Merlin Project."

There! He'd gotten that out. Now go on and tell them about the old man in the dome-house on Luna. The room was silent, except for the small insectile hum of the electric clock. Then somebody set a glass on the table, and it sounded like a hammer blow.

"Nothing, Conn?"

Kurt Fawzi was incredulous. Judge Ledue's hand shook as though palsied as he tried to relight his cigar. Dolf Kellton was looking at the drink in his hand as though he had no idea what it was. The others found their voices, one by one.

"Of course, it was the most closely guarded secret ..."

"But after forty years ..."

"Hah, don't tell me about security!" Colonel Zareff barked. "You should have seen the lengths our staff went to. I remember, once, on Mephistopheles ..."

"But there *was* a computer code-named Merlin," Judge Ledue was insisting, to convince himself more than anybody else. "Its memory-bank contained all human knowledge. It was capable of scanning all its data instantaneously, and combining, and forming associations, and reasoning with absolute accuracy, and extrapolating to produce new facts, and predicting future events, and ..."

And if you'd asked such a computer, "Is there a God?" it would have simply answered, "Present."

"We'd have won the War, except for Merlin," Zareff was declaring.

"Conn, from what you've learned of computers generally, how big would Merlin have to be?" old Professor Kellton asked.

"Well, the astrophysics computer at the University occupied a volume of a hundred thousand cubic feet. For all Merlin was supposed to do, I'd say something of the order of three million to five million.

"Well, it's a cinch they didn't haul that away with them," Lester Dawes, the banker, said.

"Oh, lots of places on Poictesme where they could have hid a thing like that," Tom Brangwyn said. "You know, a planet's a mighty big place."

"It doesn't have to be on Poictesme, even," Morgan Gatworth pointed out. "It could be anywhere in the Trisystem."

"You know where I'd have put it?" Lorenzo Menardes asked. "On one of the moons of Pantagruel."

"But that's in the Gamma System, three light years away," Kurt Fawzi objected. "There isn't a hypership on this planet, and it would take half a lifetime to get there on normal-space drive."

Conn was lifting his glass to his lips. He set it down again and rose to his feet.

"Then," he said, "we will build a hypership. On Koshchei there are shipyards and hyperdrive engines and everything we will need. We only need one normal-space interplanetary ship to get out there, and we're in business."

"Well, I don't know we need one," Judge Ledue said. "That was only an idea of Lorenzo's. I think Merlin's right here on Poictesme."

"We don't know it is," Conn replied. "And we don't know we won't need a ship. Merlin may be on Koshchei; that's where the components would be fabricated, and the Armed Forces weren't hauling anything any farther than they had to. Koshchei's only two and a half minutes away by radio; that's practically in the next room. Look; here's how they could have done it."

He went on talking, about remote controls and radio transmission and positronic brains and neutrino-circuits. They believed it all, even the little they understood. They would believe anything he told them about Merlin—except the truth.

"But this will take money," Lester Dawes said. "And after that infernal deluge of unsecured paper currency thirty years ago ..."

"I have no doubt," Judge Ledue began, "that the Planetary Government at Storisende would give assistance. I have some slight influence with President Vyckhoven ..."

"Huh-uh!" That was one of Klem Zareff's fellow planters. "We don't want Jake Vyckhoven or any of this First-Families-of-Storisende oligarchy in this at all. That's the gang that bankrupted the Government with doles and work relief, and everybody else with worthless printing-press money after the War, and they've been squatting in a circle deploring things ever since. Some of these days Blackie Perales and his pirates'll sack Storisende, for all they'd be able to do to stop him."

"We get a ship out to Koshchei, and the next thing you know we'll be the Planetary Government," Tom Brangwyn said.

Rodney Maxwell finished the brandy in his glass and set it on the table, then went to the pile of belts and holsters and began rummaging for his own. Kurt Fawzi looked up in surprise.

"Rod, you're not leaving are you?" he asked.

"Yes. It's only half an hour till time for dinner, and I think Conn and I ought to have a little fresh air. Besides, you know, we haven't seen each other for six years." He buckled on the heavy automatic and settled the belt over his hips. "You didn't have a gun, did you, Conn?" he asked. "Well, let's go."

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### III

It wasn't until they were down to the main level and outside in the little plaza to the east of the Airlines Building that his father broke the silence.

"That was quite a talk you gave them, Conn. They believed every word of it. I even caught myself starting to believe it once or twice."

Conn stopped short; his father halted beside him. "Why didn't you tell them the truth, son?" Rodney Maxwell asked.

The question, which he had been throwing at himself, angered him. "Why didn't I just grab a couple of pistols and shoot the lot of them?" he retorted. "It wouldn't have killed them any deader, and it wouldn't have hurt as

much."

"There is no Merlin. Is that it?"

He realized, suddenly, that his father had known, or suspected that all along. He started to say something, then checked himself and began again:

"There never was one. I was going to tell them, but you saw them. I couldn't."

"You're sure of it?"

"The whole thing's a myth. I'm quoting the one man in the Galaxy who ought to know. The man who commanded the Third Force here during the War."

"Foxy Travis!" His father's voice was soft with wonder. "I saw him once, when I was eight years old. I thought he'd died long ago. Why, he must be over a hundred."

"A hundred and twelve. He's living on Luna; low gravity's all that keeps him alive."

"And you talked to him?"

"Yes."

There'd been a girl in his third-year biophysics class; he'd found out that she was a great-granddaughter of Force General Travis. It had taken him until his senior midterm vacation to wangle an invitation to the dome-house on Luna. After that, it had been easy. As soon as Foxy Travis had learned that one of his great-granddaughter's guests was from Poictesme, he had insisted on talking to him.

"What did he tell you?"

The old man had been incredibly thin and frail. Under normal gravitation, his life would have gone out like a blown match. Even at one-sixth G, it had cost him effort to rise and greet the guest. There had been a younger man, a mere stripling of seventy-odd; he had been worried, and excused himself at once. Travis had laughed after he had gone out. [Pg 20]

"Mike Shanlee; my aide-de-camp on Poictesme. Now he thinks he's my keeper. He'll have a squad of doctors and a platoon of nurses in here as soon as you're gone, so take your time. Now, tell me how things are on Poictesme...."

"Just about that," he told his father. "I finally mentioned Merlin, as an old legend people still talked about. I was ashamed to admit anybody really believed in it. He laughed, and said, 'Great Ghu, is that thing still around? Well, I suppose so; it was all through the Third Force during the War. Lord only knows how these rumors start among troops. We never contradicted it; it was good for morale.'"

They had started walking again, and were out on the Mall; the sky was flaming red and orange from high cirrus clouds in the sunset light. They stopped by a dry fountain, perhaps the one from which he had seen the dust blowing. Rodney Maxwell sat down on the edge of the basin and got out two cigars, handing one to Conn, who produced his lighter.

"Conn, they wouldn't have believed you *and* Foxy Travis," he said. "Merlin's a religion with those people. Merlin's a robot god, something they can shove all their problems onto. As soon as they find Merlin, everybody will be rich and happy, the Government bonds will be redeemed at face value plus interest, the paper money'll be worth a hundred Federation centisols to the sol, and the leaves and wastepaper will be raked off the Mall, all by magic." He muttered an unprintability and laughed bitterly.

"I didn't know you were the village atheist, Father."

"In a religious community, the village atheist keeps his doubts to himself. I have to do business with these Merlinolators. It's all I can do to keep Flora from antagonizing them at school."

Flora was a teacher; now she was assistant principal of the grade schools. Professor Kellton was also school superintendent. He could see how that would be.

"Flora's not a True Believer, then?"

Rodney Maxwell shook his head. "That's largely Wade Lucas's influence, I'd say. You know about him."

Just from letters. Wade Lucas was from Baldur; he'd gone off-planet as soon as he'd gotten his M.D. Evidently the professional situation there was the same as on Terra; plenty of opportunities, and fifty competitors for each one. On Poictesme, there were few opportunities, but nobody competed for anything, not even to find Merlin.

"He'd never heard of Merlin till he came here, and when he did, he just couldn't believe in it. I don't blame him. I've heard about it all my life, and I can't."

"Why not?"

"To begin with, I suppose, because it's just another of these things everybody believes. Then, I've had to do some studying on the Third Force occupation of Poictesme to know where to go and dig, and I never found any official, or even reliably unofficial, mention of anything of the sort. Forty years is a long time to keep a secret, you know. And I can't see why they didn't come back for it after the pressure to get the troops home was off, or why they didn't build a dozen Merlins. This isn't the only planet that has problems they can't solve for themselves."

"What's Mother's attitude on Merlin?"

"She's against it. She thinks it isn't right to make machines that are smarter than people."

"I'll agree. It's scientifically impossible."

"That's what I've been trying to tell her. Conn, I noticed that after Kurt Fawzi started talking about how long it would take to get to the Gamma System, you jumped right into it and began talking up a ship. Did you think that if you got them started on that it would take their minds off Merlin?"

"That gang up in Fawzi's office? Niffenheim, no! They'll go on hunting Merlin till they die. But I was serious about the ship. An idea hit me. You gave it to me; you and Klem Zareff."

"Why, I didn't say a word ..."

"Down on the shipping floor, before we went up. You were talking about selling arms and ammunition at a profit of two hundred sols a ton, and Klem was talking as though a bumper crop was worse than a Green Death epidemic. If we had a hypership, look what we could do. How much do you think a settler on Hoth or Malebolge or Irminsul would pay for a good rifle and a thousand rounds? How much would he pay for his life?—that's what it would come to. And do you know what a fifteen-cc liqueur glass of Poictesme brandy sells for on Terra? One sol; Federation money. I'll admit it costs like Niffenheim to run a hypership, but look at the difference between what these tramp freighter captains pay at Storisende and what they get."

"I've been looking at it for a long time. Maybe if we had a few ships of our own, these planters would be breaking new ground instead of cutting their plantings, and maybe we'd get some money on this planet that was worth something. You have a good idea there, son. But maybe there's an angle to it you haven't thought of."

Conn puffed slowly at the cigar. Why couldn't they grow tobacco like this on Terra? Soil chemicals, he supposed; that wasn't his subject.

"You can't put this scheme over on its own merits. This gang wouldn't lift a finger to build a hypership. They've completely lost hope in everything but Merlin."

"Well, can do. I'll even convince them that Merlin's a space-station, in orbit off Koshchei. I think I could do that."

"You know what it'll cost? If you go ahead with it, I'm in it with you, make no mistake about that. But you and I will be the only two people on Poictesme who can be trusted with the truth. We'll have to lie to everybody else, with every word we speak. We'll have to lie to Flora, and we'll have to lie to your mother. Your mother most of all. She believes in absolutes. Lying is absolutely wrong, no matter whom it helps; telling the truth is absolutely right, no matter how much damage it does or how many hearts it breaks. You think this is going to be worth a price like that?"

"Don't you?" he demanded, and then pointed along the crumbling and littered Mall. "Look at that. Pretend you never saw it before and are looking at it for the first time. And then tell me whether it'll be worth it or not."

His father took a cigar from his mouth. For a moment, he sat staring silently.

"Great Ghu!" Rodney Maxwell turned. "I wonder how that sneaked up on me; I honestly never realized it. Yes, Conn. This is a cause worth lying for." He looked at his watch. "We ought to be starting for Senta's, but let's take a few minutes and talk this over. How are you going to get it started?"

"Well, convince them that I can find Merlin and that they can't find it without me. I think I've done that already. Then convince them that we'll have to have a ship to get to Koshchei, and—"

"Won't do. That'll take money, and money's something none of this gang has."

"You heard me talk about the stuff I found out on Terra? Father, you have no idea what all there is. You remember the old Force Command Headquarters, the one the Planetary Government took over? I know where there's a duplicate of that, completely underground. It has everything the other one had, and a lot more, because it'll be cram-full of supplies to be used in case of a general blitz that would knock out everything on the planet. And a chain of hospitals. And a spaceport, over on Barathrum, that was built inside the crater of an extinct volcano. There won't be any hyperships there of course, but there'll be equipment and material. We might be able to build a ship there. And supply depots, all over the planet; none of them has ever been opened since the War. Don't worry about financing; we have that."

His father, he could see, appreciated what he had brought home from Terra. He was nodding, with quick head jerks, at each item.

"That'll do it, all right. Now, listen; what we want to do is get a company organized, a regular limited-liability company, with a charter. We'll contribute the information you brought back from Terra, and we'll get the rest of this gang to put all the money we can twist out of them into it, so we'll be sure they won't say, 'Aw, Niffenheim with it!' and walk out on us as soon as the going gets a little tough." Rodney Maxwell got to his feet, hitching his gun-belt. "I'll pass the word to Kurt to get a meeting set up for tomorrow afternoon."

"What'll we call this company? Merlin Rediscovery, Ltd?"

"No! We keep Merlin out of it. As far as the public is supposed to know, this is just a war-material prospecting company. I'll impress on them that Merlin is to be kept a secret. That way, we'll have to engage in regular prospecting and salvage work as a front. I'll see to it that the front is also the main objective." He nodded down the Mall, toward the sunset, which was blazing even higher and redder. "Well, let's go. You don't want to be late for your own welcome-home party."

They walked slowly, still talking, until they came to the end of the Mall. The escalators to the level below weren't working. Now that he thought of it, they hadn't been when he had gone away, six years ago, but he could remember riding up and down on them as a small child. For a moment they stood in the sunset light, looking down on the lower terrace as they finished their cigars.

Senta's was mostly outdoors, the tables under the open sky. The people gathered below were looking at the sunset, too; Litchfielders loved to watch sunsets, maybe because a sunset was one of the few things economic conditions couldn't affect. There was Kurt Fawzi, the center of a group to whom he was declaiming earnestly; there was his mother, and Flora, and Flora's fiancé, who was the uncomfortable lone man in an excited feminine flock. And there was Senta herself, short and dumpy, in one of her preposterous red and purple dresses, bubbling happily one moment and screaming invective at some laggard waiter the next.

They threw away their cigars and started down the long, motionless escalator. Conn Maxwell, Hero of the Hour, marching to Destiny. He seemed to hear trumpets sounding before him.

And an occasional muted Bronx cheer.

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## IV

The alarm chimed softly beside his bed; he reached out and silenced it, and lay looking at the early sunlight in the windows, and found that he was wishing himself back in his dorm room at the University. No, back in this room, ten years ago, before any of this had started. For a while, he imagined himself thirteen years old and knowing everything he knew now, and he began mapping a campaign to establish himself as Litchfield's Juvenile Delinquent Number One, to the end that Kurt Fawzi and Dolf Kellton and the rest of them would never dream of sending him to school on Terra to find out where Merlin was.

But he couldn't even go back to yesterday afternoon in Kurt Fawzi's office and tell them the truth. All he could do was go ahead. It had seemed so easy, when he and his father had been talking on the Mall; just get a ship built, and get out to Koshchei, and open some of the shipyards and engine works there, and build a hypership. Sure; easy—once he got started.

He climbed out of bed, knuckled the sleep-sand out of his eyes, threw his robe around him, and started across the room to the bath cubicle.

They had decided to have breakfast together his first morning home. The party had broken up late, and then there had been the excitement of opening the presents he had brought back from Terra. Nobody had had a chance to talk about Merlin, or about what he was going to do, now that he was home. That, and his career of mendacity, would start at breakfast. He wanted to let his father get to the table first, to run interference for him; he took his time with his toilet and dressed carefully and slowly. Finally, he zipped up the short waist-length jacket and went out.

His father and mother and Flora were at the table, and the serving-robot was floating around a few inches off the floor, steam trailing from its coffee urn and its tray lid up to offer food. He greeted everybody and sat down at his place, and the robot came around to him. His mother had selected all the things he'd been most fond of six years ago: shovel-snout bacon, hotcakes, starberry jam, things he hadn't tasted since he had gone away. He filled his plate and poured a cup of coffee.

"You don't want to bother coming out to the dig with me this morning, do you?" his father was saying. "I'll be back here for lunch, and we'll go to the meeting in the afternoon." [Pg 26]

"Meeting?" Flora asked. "What meeting?"

"Oh, we didn't have time to tell you," Rodney Maxwell said. "You know, Conn brought back a lot of information on locations of supply depots and things like that. An amazing list of things that haven't been discovered yet. It's going to be too much for us to handle alone; we're organizing a company to do it. We'll need a lot of labor, for one thing; jobs for some of these Trampowners."

"That's going to be something awfully big," his mother said dubiously. "You never did anything like that before."

"I never had the kind of a partner I have now. It's Maxwell & Son, from now on."

"Who's going to be in this company?" Flora wanted to know.

"Oh, everybody around town; Kurt and the Judge and Klem, and Lester Dawes. All that crowd."

"The Fawzis' Office Gang," Flora said disparagingly. "I suppose they'll want Conn to take them right to where Merlin is, the first thing."

"Well, not the first thing," Conn said. "Merlin was one thing I couldn't find out anything about on Terra."

"I'll bet you couldn't!"

"The people at Armed Forces Records would let me look at everything else, and make microcopies and all, but not one word about computers. Forty years, and they still have the security lid welded shut on that."

Flora looked at him in shocked surprise. "You don't mean to tell me you believe in that thing?"

"Sure. How do you think they fought a war around a perimeter of close to a thousand light-years? They couldn't do all that out of their heads. They'd have to have computers, and the one they'd use to correlate everything and work out grand-strategy plans would have to be a dilly. Why, I'd give anything just to look at the operating panels for that thing."

"But that's just a silly story; there never was anything like Merlin. No wonder you couldn't find out about it. You were looking for something that doesn't exist, just like all these old cranks that sit around drinking brandy and mooning about what Merlin's going to do for them, and never doing anything for themselves." [Pg 27]

"Oh, they're going to do something, now, Flora," his father told her. "When we get this company organized—"

"You'll dig up a lot of stuff you won't be able to sell, like that stuff you've been bringing in from Tenth Army, and then you'll go looping off chasing Merlin, like the rest of them. Well, maybe that'll be a little better than just sitting in Kurt Fawzi's office talking about it, but not much."

It kept on like that. Conn and his father tried several times to change the subject; each time Flora ignored the effort and returned to her diatribe. Finally, she put her plate and cup on the robot's tray and got to her feet.

"I have to go," she said. "Maybe I can do something to keep some of these children from growing up to be Merlin-worshippers like their parents."

She flung out of the room angrily. Mrs. Maxwell looked after her in distress.

"And I thought it was going to be so nice, having breakfast together again," she lamented.

Somehow the breakfast wasn't quite as good as he'd thought it was at first. He wondered how many more breakfasts like that he was going to have to sit through. He and his father finished quickly and got up, while his mother started the robot to clearing the table.

"Conn," she said, after his father had gone out, "you shouldn't have gotten Flora started like that."

"I didn't get Flora started; she's equipped with a self-starter. If she doesn't believe in Merlin, that's her business. A lot of these people do, and I'm going to help them hunt for it. That's why they all chipped in to send me to school on Terra; remember?"

"Yes, I know." Her voice was heavy with distress. "Conn, do you really believe there is a ... that thing?" she asked.

"Why, of course." He was mildly surprised at how sincerely and straightforwardly he said it. "I don't know where it is, but it's somewhere on Poictesme, or in the Alpha System."

"Well, do you think it would be a good thing to find it?" [Pg 28]

That surprised him. Everybody knew it would be, and his mother didn't share his father's attitude about things everybody knew. She hadn't any business questioning a fundamental postulate like that.

"It frightens me," she continued. "I don't even like to think about it. A soulless intelligence; it seems evil to me."

"Well, of course it's soulless. It's a machine, isn't it? An aircar's soulless, but you're not afraid to ride in one."

"But this is different. A machine that can think. Conn, people weren't meant to make machines like that, wiser than they are."



"Now wait a minute, Mother. You're talking to a computerman now." Professional authority was something his mother oughtn't to question. "A computer like Merlin isn't intelligent, or wise, or anything of the sort. It doesn't think; the people who make computers and use them do the thinking. A computer's a tool, like a screwdriver; it has to have a man to use it."

"Well, but...."

"And please, don't talk about what people are *meant* to do. People aren't *meant* to do things; they *mean* to do things, and nine times out of ten, they end by doing them. It may take a hundred thousand years from a Stone Age savage in a cave to the captain of a hyperspace ship, but sooner or later they get there."

His mother was silent. The soulless machine that had been clearing the table floated out of the room, the dishwasher in its rectangular belly gurgling. Maybe what he had told her was logical, but women aren't impressed by logic. She knew better—for the good old feminine reason, *Because*.

"Wade Lucas wanted me to drop in on him for a checkup," he mentioned. "That's rubbish; I had one for my landing pratique on the ship. He just wants to size up his future brother-in-law."

"Well, you ought to go see him."

"How did Flora come to meet him, anyhow?"

"Well, you know, he came from Baldur. He was in Storisende, looking for an opening to start a practice, and he heard about some medical equipment your father had found somewhere and came out to see if he could <sup>use</sup> it. Your father and Judge Ledue and Mr. Fawzi talked him into opening his office here. Then he and Flora got acquainted...." She asked, anxiously: "What did you think of him, Conn?"

"Seems like a regular guy. I think I'll like him." A husband like Wade Lucas might be a good thing for Flora. "I'll drop in on him, sometime this morning."

His mother went toward the rear of the house—more soulless machines, like the housecleaning-robot, and the laundry-robot, to look after. He went into his father's office and found the cigar humidior, just where it had been when he'd stolen cigars out of it six years ago and thought his father never suspected what he was doing.

Now, why didn't they export this tobacco? It was better than anything they grew on Terra; well, at least it was different, just as Poictesme brandy was different from Terran bourbon or Baldur honey-rum. That was the sort of thing that could be sold in interstellar trade anytime and anywhere; the luxury goods that were unique. Staple foodstuffs, utility textiles, metal products, could be produced anywhere, and sooner or later they were. That was the reason for the original, pre-War depression: the customers were all producing for themselves. He'd talk that over with his father. He wished he'd had time to take some economics at the University.

He found the file his father kept up-to-date on salvage sites found and registered with the Claims Office in Storisende. Some of the locations he had brought back data for had been discovered, but, to his relief, not the underground duplicate Force Command Headquarters, and not the spaceport on the island continent of Barathrum, to the east. That was all right.

He went to the house-defense arms closet and found a 10-mm Navy pistol, and a belt and spare clips. Making sure that the pistol and magazines were loaded, he buckled it on. He debated getting a vehicle out of the hangar on the landing stage, decided against it, and started downtown on foot. [Pg 30]

One of the first people he met was Len Yeniguchi, the tailor. He would be at the meeting that afternoon. He managed, while talking, to comment on the cut of Conn's suit, and finger the material.

"Ah, nice," he complimented. "Made on Terra? We don't see cloth like that here very often."

He meant it wasn't Armed Forces salvage.

"Father ought to be around to see you with a bolt of material, to have a suit made," he said. "For Ghu's sake, either talk him into having a short jacket like this, or get him to buy himself a shoulder holster. He's ruined every

coat he ever owned, carrying a gun on his hip."

A little farther on, he came to a combat car grounded in the middle of the street. It was green, with black trimmings, and lettered in black, GORDON VALLEY HOME GUARD. Tom Brangwyn was standing beside it, talking to a young man in a green uniform.

"Hello, Conn." The town marshal looked at his hip and grinned. "See you got all your clothes on this morning. You were just plain indecent, yesterday.... You know Fred Karski, don't you?"

Yes, now that Tom mentioned it, he did. He and Fred had gone to school together at the Litchfield Academy. But the six years since they'd seen each other last had made a lot of difference in both of them. He was beginning to think that the only strangers in Litchfield were his own contemporaries. They shook hands, and Conn looked at the combat car and Fred Karski's uniform.

"What's going on?" he asked. "The System States Alliance to business again?"

Karski laughed. "Oh, that's the Colonel's idea. Green and black were his colors in the War, and he's in command of the regiment."

"Regiment? You need a whole regiment?" Conn asked.

"Well, it's two companies, each about the size of a regular army platoon, but we have to call it a regiment so he can keep his old Rebel Army rank."

"We could use a regiment, Conn," Tom Brangwyn said seriously. "You have no idea how bad things have gotten. Over on the east coast, the outlaws are looting whole towns. About four months ago, they sacked Waterville; burned the whole town and killed close to a hundred people. That was Blackie Perales' gang."

"Who is this Blackie Perales? I heard the name mentioned in connection with the *Harriet Barne*."

"Blackie Perales is anybody the Planetary Government can't catch, which means practically any outlaw," Fred Karski said.

"No, Fred; there is a Blackie Perales," Tom Brangwyn said. "He used to be a planter, down in the south. The banks foreclosed on him when he couldn't pay his notes, and he turned outlaw. That's the way it's going, all around. Every time a planter loses his plantation or a farmer loses his farm, or a mechanic loses his job, he turns outlaw. Take Tramptown, here. We used to plant nothing but melons. Then, when the sale for wine and brandy dropped, the melon-planters began cutting their melon crops and raising produce, instead of buying it from up north, and turning land into pasture for cattle. The people we used to buy foodstuffs from couldn't sell all they raised, and that threw a lot of farmhands out of work. So they got the idea there was work here, and they came flocking in, and when they couldn't get jobs, they just stayed in Tramptown, stealing anything they could. We don't even try to police Tramptown any more; we just see to it they don't come up here."

"Well, where do these outlaws and pirates who are looting whole towns come from?"

"Down in the Badlands, mostly. None of them have been bothering us, since we organized the Home Guard. They tried to, a couple of times, at first. There may have been a few survivors; they spread it around that Gordon Valley wasn't any outlaws' health resort."

"Why don't you join us, Conn?" Fred Karski asked. "All our old gang belong."

"I'd like to, but I'm afraid I'm going to be kind of busy."

Brangwyn nodded. "Yes. You will be, at that," he agreed.

"So I hear," Fred Karski said. "Do you really know where it is, Conn?"

[Pg 32]

"Well, no." He went into the routine about Merlin being still classified triple-top secret. "But we'll find it. It may take time, but we will."

They talked for a while. He asked more questions about the Home Guard. His father, it seemed, had donated all the equipment. They had a hundred and seventy men on the active list, but they had a reserve of over eight hundred, and combat vehicles and weapons on all the plantations and in all the towns along the river. The reserve had only been turned out twice; both times, outlaw attacks had been stopped dead—literally. The Home Guard, it appeared, was not given to making arrests or taking prisoners. Finally, he parted from them, strolling on along the row of stores and business places, many vacant, under the south edge of the Mall, until he saw a fluorolite sign, WADE LUCAS, M. D. He entered.

Lucas wasn't busy. They went into his consultation office, and Conn took off his gun-belt and hung it up; Lucas offered cigarettes, and they lighted and sat down.

"I see you've started carrying one," he said, nodding to the pistol Conn had laid aside.

"Civic obligation. I'm going to be too busy for Home Guard duty, but if I can protect myself, it'll save somebody else the job of protecting me."

"Maybe if there weren't so many guns around, there wouldn't be so much trouble."

He felt his good opinion of Wade Lucas start to slip. The Liberals on Terra had been full of that kind of talk, which was why only four out of ten of last year's graduating class at Armed Forces Academy had been able to get active commissions. The last war had been a disaster, so don't prepare for another one; when it comes, let it be a worse disaster.

"Guns don't make trouble; people make trouble. If the troublemakers are armed, you have to be armed too. When did you last see an Air Patrol boat around here, or even a Constabulary trooper? All we have here is the Home Guard and Tom Brangwyn and three deputies, and his pay and theirs is always six months in arrears." [Pg 33]

Lucas nodded. "A bankrupt government, an unemployment rate that rises every year, currency that buys less every month. And do-it-yourself justice." The doctor blew a smoke ring and watched it float toward the ventilator-intake. "You said you're going to be busy. This company your father's talking about organizing?"

"That's right. You're going to be at the meeting at the Academy this afternoon, aren't you?"

"Yes. Just what are you going to do, after you get it organized?"

"Well, I brought back information on a great deal of undiscovered equipment and stores that the Third Force left behind...." He talked on for some time, keeping to safe generalities. "It's too big for my father and me to handle alone, even if we didn't feel morally obligated to take in the people who contributed toward sending me to school on Terra. You ought to be interested in it. I know of six fully supplied hospitals, intended to take care of the casualties in case of a System States space-attack. You can imagine, better than I can, what would be in them."

"Yes. Medical supplies of all sorts are getting hard to find. But look here; you're not going to let these people waste time looking for this alleged computer, this thing they call Merlin, are you?"

"We're looking for any valuable war material. I don't know the location of Merlin, but—"

"I'll bet you don't!" Lucas said vehemently. That was the same thing Flora had said.

"—but Merlin is undoubtedly the most valuable item of abandoned TF equipment on this planet. In the long run, I'd say, more valuable than everything else together. We certainly aren't going to ignore it."

"Good heavens, Conn! You aren't like these people here; you were educated at the University of Montevideo."

"So I was. I studied computer theory and practice. I have some doubts about Merlin being able to do some of the things these laymen like Kellton and Fawzi and Judge Ledue think it could. Those sorts of misconceptions and exaggerations have to be allowed for. But I have no doubt whatever that the master computer with which they did their strategic planning is probably the greatest mechanism of its sort ever built, and I have no doubt whatever that it still exists somewhere in the Alpha System."

He almost convinced himself of it. He did not, however, convince Wade Lucas, who was now regarding him with narrow-eyed suspicion.

"You mean you categorically state that that computer actually exists?"

"That, I think, was the general idea. Yes. I certainly do believe that Merlin exists."

Maybe he was telling the truth. Merlin existed in the beliefs and hopes of people like Dolf Kellton and Klem Zareff and Judge Ledue and Kurt Fawzi. Merlin was a god to them. Well, take Ghu, the Thoran Grandfather-God. Ghu was as preposterous, theologically, as Merlin was technologically; Ghu, except to Thorans, was a Federation-wide joke. But he'd known a couple of Thorans at the University, funny little fellows, with faces like terriers, their bodies covered with matted black hair. They believed in Ghu the way he believed in the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Ghu was with them every moment of their lives. Take away their belief in Ghu, and they would have been lost and wretched.

As lost and wretched as Kurt Fawzi or Judge Ledue, if they lost their belief in Merlin. He started to say something like that, and then thought better of it.

Yes, Virginia, there *is* a Santa Claus.

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## V

The meeting was at the Academy; when Conn and his father arrived, they found the central hall under the topside landing stage crowded. Kurt Fawzi and Professor Kellton had constituted themselves a reception committee. Franz Veltrin was in evidence with his audiovisual recorder, and Colonel Zareff was leaning on his silver-headed sword cane. Tom Brangwyn, in an unaccustomed best-suit. Wade Lucas, among a group of merchants, arguing heatedly. Lorenzo Menardes, the distiller, and Lester Dawes, the banker, and Morgan Gatworth, the lawyer, talking to Judge Ledue. About four times as many as had been in Fawzi's office the afternoon before.

Finally, everybody was shepherded into a faculty conference room; there was a long table, and a shorter one T-wise at one end. Fawzi and Kellton conducted them to this. Both of them were trying to preside, Kellton because it was his Academy, and Fawzi ex officio as mayor and professional leading citizen, and because he had come to regard Merlin as his own private project. After everybody else was seated, the two rival chairmen-presumptive remained on their feet. Fawzi was saying, "Let's come to order; we must conduct this meeting regularly," and Kellton was saying, "Gentlemen, please; let me have your attention."

If either of them took the chair, the other would resent it. Conn got to his feet again.

"Somebody will have to preside," he said, loudly enough to cut through the babble at the long table. "Would you take the chair, Judge Ledue?"

That stopped it. Neither of them wanted to contest the honor with the president-judge of the Gordon Valley court.

"Excellent suggestion, Conn. Judge, will you preside?" Professor Kellton, who had seen himself losing out to Fawzi, asked. Fawzi threw one quick look around, estimated the situation, and got with it. "Of course, Judge. You're the logical chairman. Here, will you sit here?"

Judge Ledue took the chair, looked around for something to use as a gavel, and rapped sharply with a paperweight.

"Young Mr. Conn Maxwell, who has just returned from Terra, needs no introduction to any of you," he began. Then, having established that, he took the next ten minutes to introduce Conn. When people began fidgeting, he wound up with: "Now, only about a dozen of us were at the informal meeting in Mr. Fawzi's office, yesterday. Conn, would you please repeat what you told us? Elaborate as you see fit."

Conn rose. He talked briefly about his studies on Terra to qualify himself as an expert. Then he began describing the wealth of abandoned and still undiscovered Federation war material and the many installations of which he had learned, careful to avoid giving clues to exact locations. The spaceport; the underground duplicate Force Command Headquarters; the vast underground arsenals and shops and supply depots. Everybody was awed, even his father; he hadn't had time to tell him more than a fraction of it.

Finally, somebody from the long table interrupted:

"Well, Conn; how about Merlin? That's what we're interested in."

Wade Lucas snorted indignantly.

"He's telling you about real things, things worth millions of sols, and you want him to talk about that idiotic fantasy!"

There was an angry outcry. Nobody actually shouted "*To the stake with the blasphemer!*" but that was the general idea. Judge Ledue was rapping loudly for order.

"I don't know the exact location of Merlin." Conn strove to make himself heard. "The whole subject's classified top secret. But I am certain that Merlin exists, if not on Poictesme then somewhere in the Alpha System, and I am equally certain that we can find it."

Cheers. He waited for the hubbub to subside. Lucas was trying to yell above it.

"You admit you couldn't learn anything about this so-called Merlin, but you're still certain it exists?"

"Why are you certain it doesn't?"

"Why, the whole thing's absurdly fantastic!"

"Maybe it is, to a layman like you. I studied computers, and it isn't to me."

"Well, take all these elaborate preparations against space attack you were telling us about. I think Colonel Zareff, here, who served in the Alliance Army, will bear me out that such an attack was plainly impossible."

Zareff started to agree, then realized that he was aiding and comforting the enemy. "Intelligence lag," he said. "What do you expect, with General Headquarters thirty parsecs from the fighting?"

"Yes. A computer can only process the data that's been taped into it," Conn said. That was a point he wanted to ram home, as forcibly and as often as possible. "I suppose Merlin classified an Alliance attack on Poictesme as a low-order probability, but war is the province of chance; Clausewitz said that a thousand years ago. Foxx Travis wasn't the sort of commander to let himself get caught, even by a very low-order probability."

"Well how do you explain the absence, after forty years, of any mention, in any history of the War, of Merlin? How do you get around that?"

"I don't have to. How do you get around it?"

"*Huh?*" Lucas was startled.

"Yes. Stories about Merlin were all over Poictesme, all through the Third Force, even to the enemy. Say the stories were unfounded; say Merlin never existed. Yet the belief in Merlin was an important historical fact, and no history of the War gives it so much as a footnote." He paused for effect, then continued: "That can mean only one thing. Systematic suppression, backed by the whole force of the Terran Federation. A gigantic conspiracy of silence!"

Brother! If they swallow that, I have it made; they'll swallow anything!

They did, all but Lucas. He banged his fist on the table.

"Now I've heard everything!" he shouted in disgust.

"Not quite everything, Doctor," Morgan Gatworth said. "You will hear, one of these days, that we have found Merlin."

"Yes, that'll be the day!" Lucas sprang to his feet, his chair toppling behind him. He shoved it aside with his foot. "I'm not going to argue with you. Conn Maxwell gave you a thousand-year-old quotation; I'll give you another, from Thomas Paine: 'To argue with those who have renounced the use and authority of reason is as futile as to administer medicine to the dead.' I'll add this. Conn Maxwell knows better than this balderdash he's been spouting to you. I don't know what his racket is, and I'm not staying to find out. You will, though—to your regret."

He turned and strode from the room. There was a moment's silence, after the door slammed behind him. Too bad, Conn thought. He would have made a good friend. Now he was going to make a very nasty enemy. [Pg 38]

"Well, let's get to business," his father said. "We don't have to argue about the existence of Merlin; we know that. Let's discuss the question of finding it."

"I still think it's somewhere off-planet," Lorenzo Menardes said. "The moons of Pantagruel...."

Evidently he'd read something, or seen an old film, about the moons of Pantagruel.

"No, that's too far; they'd keep it where they could use it."

"The old GHQ," Lester Dawes suggested. "Suppose it's down under that, like the place Rodney found under Tenth Army."

"I hope not," Gatworth said. "The Planetary Government took that over."

"Well, wherever it is, finding it is going to be expensive," Rodney Maxwell said. "Now, to finance the search, I propose we use this information my son brought back from Terra. Doctor Lucas was right about one thing; that's worth millions of sols. Well, I propose, also, that we set up a company and get it chartered; a prospecting company, to operate under the Abandoned Property Act of 867. My son and I will contribute this information as our share in the capitalization of the company. The work of opening these Federation installations can go on concurrently with the search for Merlin, and the profits can finance it."

Silence for a moment, then a bedlam of cheering.

"Well, let's get organized," Gatworth said. "What will we call this company?"

A number of voices shouted suggestions. Rodney Maxwell managed to get recognition and partial silence.

"It is of the first importance," he said, "that we keep our real objective—Merlin—as close a secret as possible. The Planetary Government would like to get hold of it—and I leave you to ask yourselves how far Jake Vyckhoven and his cronies are to be trusted with anything like that—and I have no doubt the Federation might try to take it away from us."

"Couldn't do it, Rodney," Judge Ledue objected. "Everything the Federation abandoned in the Trisystem is public domain now. We have a Federation Supreme Court ruling—" [Pg 39]

"What's legality to the Federation?" Klem Zareff demanded. "They fought a criminally illegal war of aggression against my people."

Down the table, somebody started singing "Rally Round the Banner, the Banner Black and Green."

"Well, I think it's a good idea to keep quiet about it, myself," Kurt Fawzi said.

"All right," Rodney Maxwell said. "Then we don't want this company to sound like anything but another salvage company. I suggest we call it Litchfield Exploration & Salvage."

"Good name, Rodney," Dawes approved. "That a motion? I second it."

Unanimously carried. They had a name, now, anyhow. Everybody began suggesting other topics for consideration—capitalization, application for charter, election of officers, stock issues. Conn paid less and less attention. Industrial finance and organization wasn't his subject, either. His father was plunging happily into it as though he had been promoting companies all his life. Conn sat and doodled with his six-color pen, mostly spherical hyperspace ships.

"We can't get all this cleared up now," Lester Dawes was protesting. "Your Honor, I mean, Mr. Chairman; I suggest that committees be appointed...."

More hassling; everybody wanted to be on all the committees. Finally, they appointed enough committees to include everybody.

"Well, that seems to be cleared up," Judge Ledue said, "I suggest a meeting day after tomorrow evening; the committees should have everything set up, and we should be able to organize ourselves and elect permanent officers. Is there anything else to discuss, or do I hear a motion to adjourn?"

Somebody thought they ought to have some idea of what the first operation would be.

"You heard me mention a spaceport," Conn said. "I can tell you, now, that it's over on Barathrum, inside the crater of an extinct volcano. I think we ought to have a look at that, first of all." [Pg 40]

"I know you seemed to think yesterday that Merlin is off-planet," Fawzi said, "I'm inclined to disagree, Conn. I think it's right here on Poictesme."

"We ought to nail that spaceport down first," Conn argued.

"Conn, you mentioned an underground duplicate of Travis's general headquarters," Zareff said. "They thought we'd possibly send a fleet here to blitz Poictesme, or they wouldn't have built that. And this underground headquarters would be the safest place on the planet; they'd make sure of that. Staff brass don't like to get caught out in the rain, not when it's raining hellburners and planetbusters. Merlin would be too big to take there along with them, so they'd put it there in the first place."

That made sense. If he'd been Foxx Travis, and if there had been a Merlin, that was exactly where he'd have put it himself. But there was no Merlin, and he wanted a ship. He argued mulishly for a little, then saw that it was hopeless and gave in.

"I want to find Merlin as much as any of you," he said. "More. Merlin was the only thing I was trained for. We'll look there first."

Somebody asked where, approximately, this underground Force Command headquarters was.

"Why, it's in the Badlands, over between the Blaubeurgs and the east coast."

"Great Ghu! We'll need an army to go in there!" Tom Brangwyn said. "That's where all these outlaws have been coming from, Blackie Perales and all."

"Then we'll get an army together," Klem Zareff said happily. "Might make a little of that reward money that's been offered."

"We'll need more than that. Well need excavation equipment, and labor. Lots of labor," Conn said. "It's a couple of hundred feet below the surface; from the plans, I'd say they just dug a big pit, built the headquarters in it, and filled it in. There are two entrances, a vertical shaft and a horizontal tunnel."

"When they pulled out, they probably filled the shaft and vitrified the rock at the outer ends," his father added. "That was what they did at Tenth Army."

Another idea hit him. "Mr. Mayor, do you think you could set up some kind of a public-works program here in Litchfield? We can't start this till after the wine-pressing's over, and we'll need a lot of labor, as I pointed out. Now, it's important that we keep all our projects a secret until we can get our claims filed. If we start this municipal fix-up-and-clean-up program, we can give work to a lot of these drifters who haven't been able to get

jobs on the plantations, get them organized into gangs, and keep them together till we're ready for the Force Command job."

Lorenzo Menardes supported the idea. "And while they were boondoggling around in Litchfield, we could pick out the best workers, get rid of the incompetents, and train a few supervisors. That's going to be one of our worst headaches; getting capable supervisors."

"You telling me?" Rodney Maxwell asked. "That was what I was wondering about: where we'd get gang-bosses. And another thing; this municipal housecleaning would mask our real preparations."

"Well, we need something like that," Fawzi said. "We've needed it for a long time. I guess it took Conn, coming home from Terra, to see how badly we've let the town get run down. Franz, suppose you and Tom Brangwyn and Lorenzo form a committee on that. Look around, see what needs fixing up worst, and set up a project. Who's city engineer now?"

"Abe O'Leary; he died six years ago," Dawes said. "You never appointed his successor."

"Well, I guess I never got around to that," the mayor of Litchfield admitted.

When the meeting finally adjourned, they went up and got in the car; his father lifted it straight up to thirty thousand feet and started circling. An aircar was one place where they could talk safely.

"Conn, I was kind of worried, down there. You were being a little too positive. You know, you're only twenty-three. As long as you agree with those people, you're a brilliant young man; you start getting ideas of your own, and you're just a half-baked kid. You let the older and wiser heads run things. You can't begin to hope to foul things up the way they can. Look at all the experience they've had."

"But we've got to have a ship. Everything depends on that."

"I know it does. We'll get a ship. Let Kurt Fawzi and Klem Zareff and the rest of them have this duplicate Force Command thing first, though. Keep them happy. As soon as we have that opened, you can take a gang and run over to Barathrum and grab your spaceport. Wait till they find out that Merlin isn't at Force Command Duplicate. Then you can convince them it's really on Koshchei."

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## VI

The car Rodney Maxwell got out of the hangar the next morning wasn't the one he and Conn had gone to the meeting in; it was the one he had flown in from Tenth Army HQ at noon of the previous day. An Army reconnaissance job, slim and needlelike, completely enclosed, looking more like a missile than a vehicle, and armored in dazzling, iridescent collapsium. There was something to living on Poictesme, at that; only a millionaire on Terra could have owned a car like that.

"Nice," Conn said. "Where did you dig it?"

"Where we're going, Tenth Army."

"I'll bet she'll do Mach Three."

"Better than that. I've never had her above 2.5, but the airspeed gauge is marked up to four. And she has everything: all kinds of detection instruments, cameras, audiovisual pickups, armament. And the armor; you can take her through any kind of radiation."

The armor was only a couple of micromicrons thick, but it would stop anything. It was collapsed matter, the electron shells of the atoms collapsed upon the nuclei, the atoms in actual contact. That plating made eighth-inch



sheet steel as heavy as twelve-inch armor plate, and in texture and shielding properties, lead was like sponge by comparison. [Pg 43]

They climbed in, and Rodney Maxwell snapped on the screens that served as windows. Conn leaned back and looked at the underside view in a screen on the roof of the car, as his father started the lift-engine.

"Still think it's worth the price, son?" his father asked.

The price had begun to rise; even so, he was afraid that what they had paid so far was only the down payment. Dinner last evening. Flora, who had evidently been talking to Wade Lucas, shouting accusations at them; his mother fleeing from the table in tears. As the car rose, he reached out and turned on and adjusted the telescreen for the under-view.

"Keep your eye on that, Father," he said. "That's what we're paying to get rid of."

A distillery, bigger than the Menardes plant, long closed and now half roofless and crumbling. Rows of warehouses, empty after the War until taken over by homeless vagrants. Jerry-built shanties with rattletrap aircars grounded around them. Tramp town, a festering sore on the south side of Litchfield.

"If we put this over," he continued, "all those tramps will have steady work and good homes. We can have a park there, with fountains that'll work. Maybe even Flora and Mother will think we've done something worth doing."

"It'll be kind of hard to take in the meantime, though, but if you can take it, I can." Rodney Maxwell turned off the underside televue screen and put on the forward one. "See that little pink spot over there? Sunrise on the east side of Snagtooth; Tenth Army's just behind us. Now, let's see if this airspeed gauge is telling the truth or just bragging."

Sudden acceleration pushed them back in their seats. The calibrations on the gauge rose swiftly; the pink-lighted peak grew swiftly in the televue screen. The gauge hadn't been bragging, it had been understating; the car had more speed than the instrument could register. Two and a half minutes from Litchfield, they were decelerating and swinging slowly around Snagtooth, looking down on a tilted plateau that ended on the western side in a sheer drop of almost a thousand feet. [Pg 44]

There were ruinous buildings on it: barracks and storehouses and offices, an airship dock and an air-traffic control tower from which all the glass had long ago vanished, a great steel telecast tower that had fallen, crushing a couple of buildings. Young trees had already grown among the wreckage.

"Look over there, on the slope below it; there's one entrance to the shelters." There was a clearing among the evergreens, half a mile from the buildings, and raw earth, and a couple of big scows grounded near. "They bulldozed rock and earth over the end of the tunnel. Then, there's another one down on that bench, a couple of hundred feet below the edge of the plateau. They blasted rock down over that. The main entrance is a vertical shaft under that pre-stressed concrete dome. That was chapel, auditorium, or something. They just covered it with sheet metal and poured a foot of concrete on top."

They floated down above the broken roofs and crumbling walls, and grounded in the area between the main administration building and the offices, back of the ship docks. Once, he supposed, it had been a lawn. Then it had been a jungle. Now it was a scuffed, littered, bare-trodden work-yard. Men were straggling out of the administration building, lighting pipes and cigarettes; they all wore new but work-soiled infantry battle dress. All of them waved and shouted greetings; one, about Conn's own age, approached. As he got out, Conn saw the resemblance to Lester Dawes, the banker, before he recognized Anse Dawes, who had been one of his closest friends six years ago. They shook hands and pounded each other on the back.

"Hey, you're looking great, Conn!" They all told him that; he'd begin to believe it pretty soon. "Sorry I couldn't make the party, but somebody had to sit on the lid here, and Jerry Rivas and I cut cards for it and Jerry won."

"You didn't tell me Anse was with you," he reproached his father. Rodney Maxwell said he'd been saving that for a surprise.

When Conn asked Anse what was the matter with the bank, he said: "For the birds; I'd as soon count sheets of toilet paper as this stuff we're using for money. Sooner. Toilet paper can be used for something, and this paper money's too stiff. Maybe some of this stuff we're digging here isn't worth much, but at least it's real."

That was something else the Maxwell Plan would have to take care of. Gresham's Law was running hog-wild on Poictesme. A Planetary Government sol was worth about ten centisols, Federation, and aside from deposit boxes, woolen socks under the mattress, and tin cans buried in the corner of the cellar, Federation currency was nonexistent.

"Had breakfast yet?" Rodney Maxwell asked.

"Oh, hours ago. I was out and shot another spikenose; it's hanging up back of the kitchen, waiting for the cook to skin it and cut it up." He grinned at Conn. "You don't get this kind of hunting in a bank, either."

"Jerry still inside? I want to see him. Suppose you take Conn around and show him the sights. And don't worry about him bumping you out of a job. Worry about the six or eight extra jobs you'll have to do besides your own, from now on."

Conn and Anse crossed the yard and entered one of the office buildings, through a big breach in the wall. Anse said: "I did that myself; 90-mm tank gun. When we want a wall out of the way, we get it out of the way." Inside were a lot of lifters and skids and power shovels and things; laborers were assembling for work assignments. Most of them had been with his father six years ago and he knew them. They hadn't done any growing up in the meantime. They climbed into an airjeep and floated out over the edge of the plateau, letting down past the sheer cliff to where the lower lateral shaft had been opened. A great deal of rock had been shoveled and bulldozed away to expose it; it was twenty feet high and forty wide. Anse simply steered the jeep inside and up the tunnel.

There were occasional lights on at the ceiling. Anse said they were all powered from their own nuclear-electric conversion units. "We don't have the central power on here; there's a big mass-energy converter, but we're tearing it down to ship out." [Pg 46]

That was something they could get a good price for. Maybe even one-tenth of what it was worth. At least they wouldn't have to sell it by the ton.

The tunnel ended in an enormous room a couple of hundred feet square and fifty high. There was a wide aisle up the middle; on either side, contragravity equipment was massed. Tanks with long 90-mm guns. Combat cars. Small airboats. Rank on rank of air-cavalry single-mounts, egg-shaped things just big enough for a man to sit in, with quadruple machine guns in front and flame-jets behind. Ambulances armored against radiation; decontamination units; mobile workshops; mobile kitchens. Troop carriers, jeeps, staff cars; power shovels, manipulators, lifters. All waiting, for forty years, to swarm out as soon as the bombs that never came stopped falling.

They floated the jeep along hallways beyond, and got down to look into rooms. Work was already going on in the power plant; a gang under a slim young man whom Anse introduced as Mohammed Matsui were using repair-robots to get canisters of live plutonium out of a reactor. Workshops. Laundries. Storerooms. Kitchens, some stripped and a few still intact. A hospital. Guardhouse and lockup.

More storerooms on the level above, reached by returning to the vehicle hangar and lifting to an upper entrance. By this time, gangs were at work there, too, moving contragravity skids in empty and out loaded.

"The CO here must have had squirrel blood," Anse said. "I think when the evacuation orders came through he just gathered up everything there was topside and crammed it down here, any old way. Honest to Ghu, this place was packed solid when we found it. Nobody'd believe it."

"Wait till you see the next one."

"You mean there's another place like this?"

"You can say so. You can say a twenty-megaton thermonuclear is like a hand grenade, too."

Anse Dawes simply didn't believe that.

When they got back to the Administration Building on top, they found Rodney Maxwell, Jerry Rivas, the general foremen, and half a dozen gang foremen, in consultation. [Pg 47]

"We're getting a hundred and fifty more men and ten farm scows from Litchfield," his father said. "Dave McCade's coming out from our yard, and Tom Brangwyn's sending one of his deputies to help boss them. Well have to keep an eye on this crowd; they're all Tramtown hoodlums, but that's the best we can get. We're going to have to get this place cleaned out in a hurry. We only have about two weeks till the wine-pressing's over, and then we want to start the next operation. Conn, did you see all that engineering equipment, down on the bottom level?"

"Yes. I think we ought to leave a lot of that here—the shovels and bulldozers and manipulators and so on. We can move it direct to Force Command. How are we fixed for blasting explosives?"

"Name it and we have it. Cataclysmite, FJ-7, anything you want."

"We'll need a lot of it."

"We're going to have to get a ship. I mean a contragravity ship, a freighter; first, to move this stuff out of here, and then to move the stuff out of Force Command. And we want it mounted with heavy armament, too. We not only want a freighter, we want a fighting ship."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it," Rodney Maxwell said. "Where we're going is full of outlaws; there must be hundreds of them holing up over there. That's where all the trouble on the east coast comes from. Now, outlaws are sure-thing players. They want to be alive to spend their loot, and they won't tackle anything that's too tough for them. A lot of guards and combat equipment may look like a loss on the books, but the books won't show how much of a loss you might take if you didn't have them. I want this operation armed till it'll be too much for all the outlaws on the planet to tackle."

That made sense. It also made sense out of the billions of sols the Federation had spent preparing for an invasion that never came. If it had come and found them unprepared, the loss might have been the war itself.

The scows and the newly hired workers began arriving a little after noon. The scows had been borrowed from plantations where the crop had been gotten in; there were melon leaves and bits of vine in the bottom of them. The workers were a bleary-eyed and unsavory lot; Conn had a suspicion, which Brangwyn's deputy confirmed, that they had been collected by mass vagrancy arrests in Tramtown. As soon as they started arriving, Jerry Rivas hurried down to the old provost-marshal's headquarters and came back with a lot of rubber billy-clubs, which he issued to his gang-bosses, regular and temporary. A few times they had to be used. By evening, however, the insubordinate and troublesome had been quieted. They would all steal anything they could put in their pockets, but that was to be expected. By evening, too, the contents of the underground treasure trove was moving out in a steady stream, and scows were shuttling to and from Litchfield.

Rodney Maxwell was going back to town after lunch the next day. Conn wanted to know if he should go along.

"No, you stay here; help keep things moving. Remember what I told you about the older and wiser heads? Let me handle them. I've been around them, heaven pity me, longer than you have. Just give me an audiovisual of your proxy and I'll vote your stock."

"How much stock do I have, by the way?"

"The same as I have—ten thousand five hundred shares of common, at twenty centisols a share. But watch where it goes after we open Force Command."

His father was back, two days later, to report:

"We're organized. Kurt Fawzi's president, of course, and does he love it. That'll keep him out of mischief. Dolf Kellton's secretary; he has an office force at the Academy and can conscript students to help. He's organizing a research team from his seniors and post-grad students to work in the Planetary Library at Storisende. There are a lot of old Third Force records there; he may find something useful. Of course, Lester Dawes is treasurer."

"What are you?"

"Vice-president in charge of operations. That's what I spent all yesterday log-rolling, baby-kissing and cigar-passing to get."

"And what am I, if it's a fair question?"

"You have a very distinguished position; you are a n