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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KING OF THE CITY ***



THE KING OF THE CITY

By KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by FINLAY

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***He was a sort of taxi-driver, delivering
a commuter to the city. The tank traps and
armored cars were the hazards of the trade!***

I stood in the shadows and looked across at the rundown lot with the windblown trash packed against the wire mesh barrier fence and the yellow glare panel that said HAUG ESCORT. There was a row of city-scarred hacks parked on the cracked ramp. They hadn't suffered the indignity of a wash-job for a long time. And the two-story frame building behind them—that had once been somebody's country house—now showed no paint except the foot-high yellow letters over the office door.

Inside the office a short broad man with small eyes and yesterday's beard gnawed a cigar and looked at me.

"Portal-to-portal escort cost you two thousand C's," he said. "Guaranteed."

"Guaranteed how?" I asked.

He waved the cigar. "Guaranteed you get into the city and back out again in one piece." He studied his cigar. "If somebody don't plug you first," he added.

"How about a one-way trip?"

"My boy got to come back out, ain't he?"

I had spent my last brass ten-dollar piece on a cup of coffee eight hours before, but I had to get into the city. This was the only idea I had left.

"You've got me wrong," I said. "I'm not a customer. I want a job."

"Yeah?" He looked at me again, with a different expression, like a guy whose new-found girl friend has just mentioned a price.

"You know Gra'nyauk?"

"Sure," I said. "I grew up here."

He asked me a few more questions, then thumbed a button centered in a ring of grime on the wall behind him. A chair scraped beyond the door; it opened and a tall bony fellow with thick wrists and an adams apple set among heavy neck tendons came in.

The man behind the desk pointed at me with his chin.

"Throw him out, Lefty."

Lefty gave me a resentful look, came around the desk and reached for my collar. I leaned to the right and threw a hard left jab to the chin. He rocked back and sat down.

"I get the idea," I said. "I can make it out under my own power." I turned to the door.

"Stick around, mister. Lefty's just kind of a like a test for separating the men from the boys."

"You mean I'm hired?"

He sighed. "You come at a good time. I'm short of good boys."

I helped Lefty up, then dusted off a chair and listened to a half-hour briefing on conditions in the city. They weren't good. Then I went upstairs to the chart room to wait for a call.

It was almost ten o'clock when Lefty came into the room where I was looking over the maps of the city. He jerked his head.

"Hey, you."

A weasel-faced man who had been blowing smoke in my face slid off his stool, dropped his cigarette and smeared it under his shoe.

"You," Lefty said. "The new guy."

I belted my coat and followed him down the dark stairway, and out across the littered tarmac, glistening wet under the polyarcs, to where Haug stood talking to another man I hadn't seen before.

Haug flicked a beady glance my way, then turned to the stranger. He was a short man of about fifty with a mild expressionless face and expensive clothes.

"Mr. Stenn, this is Smith. He's your escort. You do like he tells you and he'll get you into the city and see your party and back out again in one piece."

The customer looked at me. "Considering the fee I'm paying, I sincerely hope so," he murmured.

"Smith, you and Mr. Stenn take number 16 here." Haug patted a hinge-sprung hood, painted a

bilious yellow and scabbed with license medallions issued by half a dozen competing city governments.

Haug must have noticed something in Stenn's expression.

"It ain't a fancy-looking hack, but she's got full armor, heavy-duty gyros, crash-shocks, two-way music and panic gear. I ain't got a better hack in the place."

Stenn nodded, popped the hatch and got in. I climbed in the front and adjusted the seat and controls to give me a little room. When I kicked over the turbos they sounded good.

"Better tie in, Mr. Stenn," I said. "We'll take the Canada turnpike in. You can brief me on the way."

I wheeled 16 around and out under the glare-sign that read "HAUG ESCORT." In the eastbound linkway I boosted her up to 90. From the way the old bus stepped off, she had at least a megahorse under the hood. Maybe Haug wasn't lying, I thought. I pressed an elbow against the power pistol strapped to my side.

I liked the feel of it there. Maybe between it and old 16 I could get there and back after all.

"My destination," Stenn said, "is the Manhattan section."

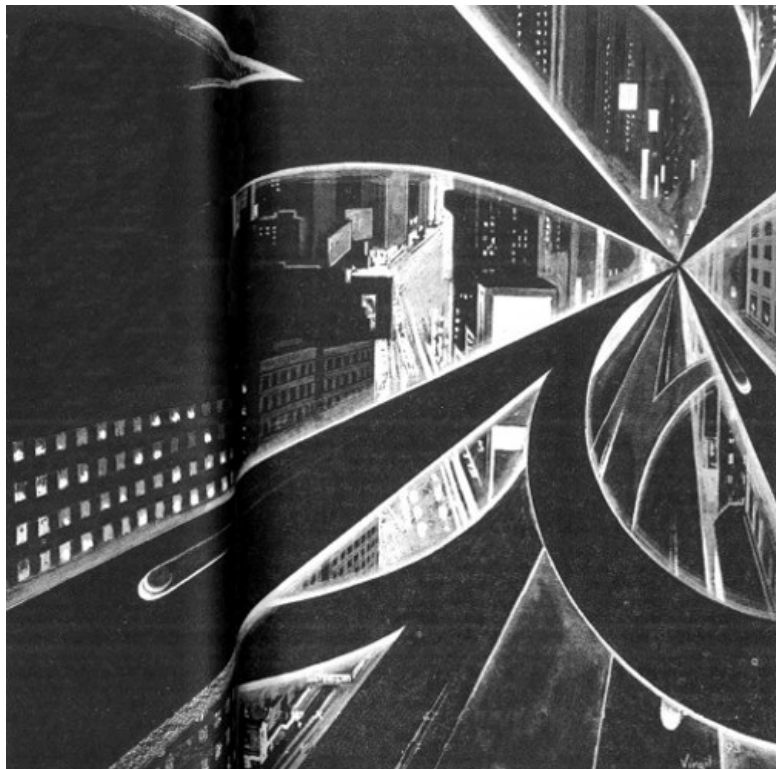
That suited me perfectly. In fact, it was the first luck I'd had since I burned the uniform. I looked in the rear viewer at Stenn's face. He still wore no expression. He seemed like a mild little man to be wanting into the cage with the tigers.

"That's pretty rough territory, Mr. Stenn," I said. He didn't answer.

"Not many tourists go there," I went on. I wanted to pry a little information from him.

"I'm a businessman," Stenn said.

I let it go at that. Maybe he knew what he was doing. For me, there was no choice. I had one slim lead, and I had to play it out to the end. I swung through the banked curves of the intermix and onto the turnpike and opened up to full throttle.



It was fifteen minutes before I saw the warning red lights ahead. Haug had told me about this. I slowed.

"Here's our first roadblock, Mr. Stenn," I said. "This is an operator named Joe Naples. All he's after is his toll. I'll handle him; you sit tight in the hack. Don't say anything, don't do anything, no matter what happens. Understand?"

"I understand," Stenn said mildly.

I pulled up. My lights splashed on the spikes of a Mark IX tank trap. I set the parking jacks and got out.

"Remember what I told you," I said. "No matter what." I walked up into the beam of the lights.

A voice spoke from off to the side.

"Douse 'em, Rube."

I went back and cut the lights. Three men sauntered out onto the highway.

"Keep the hands away from the sides, Rube."

One of the men was a head taller than the others. I couldn't see his face in the faint red light from the beacon, but I knew who he was.

"Hello, Naples," I said.

He came up to me. "You know me, Rube?"

"Sure," I said. "The first thing Haug told me was pay my respects to Mr. Naples."

Naples laughed. "You hear that, boys? They know me pretty good on the outside, ha?"

He looked at me, not laughing any more. "I don't see you before."

"My first trip."

He jerked a thumb at the hack. "Who's your trick?"

"A businessman. Name is Stenn."

"Yeah? What kind business?"

I shook my head. "We don't quiz the cash customers, Joe."

"Let's take a look." Naples moved off toward the hack, the boys at his side. I followed. Naples looked in at Stenn. Stenn sat relaxed and looked straight ahead. Naples turned away, nodded to one of his helpers. The two moved off a few yards.

The other man, a short bullet-headed thug in a grease-spatted overcoat, stood by the hack, staring in at Stenn. He took a heavy old-style automatic from his coat pocket, pulled open the door. He aimed the gun at Stenn's head and carefully squeezed the trigger.

The hammer clicked empty.

"Ping," he said. He thrust the gun back in his pocket, kicked the door shut and went over to join Naples.

"Okay, Rube," Naples called.

I went over to him.

"I guess maybe you on the level," he said. "Standard fee. Five hundred, Old Federal notes."

I had to be careful now. I held a bland expression, reached in—slowly—took out my wallet. I extracted two hundred-C notes and held them out.

Naples looked at them, unmoving. The thug in the dirty overcoat moved up close, and suddenly swung the edge of his palm at my wrist. I was ready; I flicked my hand aside and chopped him hard at the base of the neck. He dropped.

I was still holding out the money.

"That clown isn't worthy of a place in the Naples organization," I said.

Naples looked down at the man, stirred him with his foot.

"A clown," he said. He took the money and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"Okay, Rube," he said. "My regards to Haug."

I got in the hack and moved up to the barrier. It started up, trundled aside. Naples was bending over the man I had downed. He took the pistol from the pocket of the overcoat, jacked the action and aimed. There was a sharp crack. The overcoat flopped once. Naples smiled over at me.

"He ain't worthy a place in the Naples organization," he said.

I waved a hand vaguely and gunned off down the road.

II

The speaker in my ear hummed.

I grunted an acknowledgement and a blurred voice said, "Smith, listen. When you cross the South Radial, pick up the Midwest Feed-off. Take it easy and watch for Number Nine Station. Pull off there. Got it?"

I recognized the voice. It was Lefty, Haug's Number One boy. I didn't answer.

"What was the call?" Stenn asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Nothing."

The lights of the South Radial Intermix were in sight ahead now.

I slowed to a hundred and thought about it. My personal motives told me to keep going, my job as a paid Escort was to get my man where he wanted to go. That was tough enough, without detours. I eased back up to one-fifty, took the Intermix with gyros screaming, and curved out onto the thruway.

The speaker hummed. "What are you trying to pull, wise guy?" He sounded mad. "That was the South Radial you just passed up—"

"Yeah," I said. "That's right. Smitty takes 'em there and he brings 'em back. Don't call us, we'll call you."

There was a long hum from the speaker. "Oh, a wiseacre," it said finally. "Listen, rookie, you got a lot to learn. This guy is bankrolled. I seen the wad when he paid Haug off. So all right, we cut you in. Now, get this...."

He gave me detailed instructions. When he was finished, I said, "Don't wait up for me."

I took the speaker out of my ear and dropped it into the disposal slot. We drove along quietly for quite a while.

I was beginning to recognize my surroundings. This section of the turnpike had been opened the year before I left home. Except for the lack of traffic and the dark windows along the way it hadn't changed.

I was wondering just what Lefty's next move would be when a pair of powerful beams came on from the left, then pulled onto the highway, speeding up to pace me. I rocketed past before he had made full speed. I heard a loud spang, and glass chips scattered on my shoulder. I twisted and looked. A starred hole showed in the bubble, above the rear seat.

"Duck!" I yelled. Stenn leaned over, put his head down.

The beams were gaining on me. I twisted the rear viewer, hit the I/R switch. A three-ton combat car, stripped, but still mounting twin infinite repeaters. Against that, old 16 was a kiddie car. I held my speed and tried to generate an idea. What I came up with wasn't good, but it was all I had.

A half a mile ahead there should be a level-split, one of those awkward ones that caused more than one pile-up in the first few months the turnpike was open. Maybe my playmates didn't know about it.

They were about to overtake me now. I slowed just a little, and started fading to the right. They followed me, crowding my rear wheel. I heard the spang again, twice, but nothing hit me. I was on the paved shoulder now, and could barely see the faded yellow cross-hatching that warned of the abutment that divided the pavement ahead.

I held the hack in the yellow until the last instant, then veered right and cleared the concrete barrier by a foot, hit the down-curve at a hundred and eighty in a howl of gyros and brakes—and the thunderous impact of the combat car.

Then I was off the pavement, fighting the wheel, slamming through underbrush, then miraculously back on the hard surface and coasting to a stop in the clear.

I took a deep breath and looked back. The burning remains of the car were scattered for a quarter of a mile along the turnpike. That would have been me if I had gauged it wrong.

I looked at the canopy of the hack. Three holes, not a foot apart, right where a passenger's head would be if he were sitting upright. Stenn was unconcernedly brushing glass dust from his jacket.

"Very neat, Mr. Smith," he said. "Now shall we resume our journey?"

"Maybe it's time you leveled with me, Stenn," I said.

He raised his eyebrows at me slightly.

"When Joe Naples' boy Friday pointed the gun at your head you didn't bat an eyelash," I said.

"I believe those were your instructions," Stenn said mildly.

"Pretty good for a simple businessman. I don't see you showing any signs of the shakes now, either, after what some might call a harrowing experience."

"I have every confidence in your handling—"

"Nuts, Stenn. Those three holes are pretty well grouped, wouldn't you say? The man that put them there was hitting where he was aiming. And he was aiming for you."

"Why me?" Stenn looked almost amused.

"I thought it was a little shakedown crew, out to teach me a lesson," I said. "Until I saw where the shots were going."

Stenn looked at me thoughtfully. He reached up and took a micro-speaker from his ear.

"The twin to the one you rashly disposed of," he said. "Mr. Haug was kind enough to supply it—for a fee. I must tell you that I had a gun in my hand as we approached the South Radial Intermix."

Had you accepted the invitation to turn off, I would have halted the car, shot you and gone on alone. Happily, you chose to resist the temptation, for reasons of your own...." He looked at me inquiringly.

"Maybe I'm sap enough to take the job seriously," I said.

"That may possibly be true," Stenn said.

"What's your real errand here, Stenn? Frankly, I don't have time to get involved."

"Really? One wonders if you have irons in the fire, Smith. But never mind. I shan't pry. Are we going on?"

I gave him my stern penetrating look.

"Yeah," I said. "We're going on."

In twenty minutes, we were on the Inner Concourse and the polyarcs were close together, lighting the empty sweep of banked pavement. The lights of the city sparkled across the sky ahead, and gave me a ghostly touch of the old thrill of coming home.

I doused that feeling fast. After eight years there was nothing left there for me to come home to. The city had a lethal welcome for intruders; it wouldn't be smart to forget that.

I didn't see the T-Bird until his spot hit my eyes and he was beside me, crowding.

I veered and hit the brakes, with a half-baked idea of dropping back and cutting behind him, but he stayed with me. I had a fast impression of squealing metal and rubber, and then I was skidding to a stop up against the deflector rails with the T-Bird slanted across my prow. Its lid popped almost before the screech died away, and I was looking down the muzzles of two power pistols. I kept both hands on the wheel, where they could see them, and sat tight.

I wondered whose friends we had met this time.

Two men climbed out, the pistols in sight, and came up to the hack. The first one was a heavy-set Slavic type zipped into a tight G. I. weather suit. He motioned. I opened up and got out, not making any sudden movements. Stenn followed. A cold wind was whipping along the concourse, blowing a fine misty rain hard against my cheek. The polyarcs cast black shadows on gray faces.

The smaller man moved over to Stenn and crowded him back against the hack. The Slav motioned again, and I moved over by the T-Bird. He fished my wallet out and put it in his pocket without looking at it. I heard the other man say something to Stenn, and then the sound of a blow. I turned my head slowly, so as not to excite my watchdog. Stenn was picking himself up. He started going through his pockets, showing everything to the man with the gun, then dropping it on the ground. The wind blew cards and papers along until they soaked up enough water to stick. Stenn carried a lot of paper.

The gunny said something and Stenn started pulling off his coat. He turned it inside out, and held it out. The gunny shook his head, and motioned to my Slav. He looked at me, and I tried to read his mind. I moved across toward the hack. I must have guessed right because he didn't shoot me. The Slav pocketed his gun and took the coat. Methodically, he tore the lining out, found nothing, dropped the ripped garment and kicked it aside. I shifted position, and the Slav turned and backhanded me up against the hack.

"Lay off him, Heavy," the other hood said. "Maxy didn't say nothing about this mug. He's just a Escort."

Heavy started to get his gun out again. I had an idea he was thinking about using it. Maybe that's why I did what I did. As his hand dipped into his pocket, I lunged, wrapped an arm around him and yanked out my own artillery. I held onto a handful of the weather suit and dug the pistol in hard. He stood frozen. Heavy wasn't as dumb as he looked.

His partner had backed a step, the pistol in his hand covering all of us.

"Drop it, Slim," I said. "No hard feelings, and we'll be on our way."

Stenn stood absolutely motionless. He was still wearing his mild expression.

"Not a chance, mug," the gunny said softly. No one moved.

"Even if you're ready to gun your way through your pal, I can't miss. Better settle for a draw."

"Maxy don't like draws, mister."

"Stenn," I said. "Get in the T-Bird. Head back the way we came, and don't slow down to read any billboards."

Stenn didn't move.

"Get going," I said. "Slim won't shoot."

"I employed you," Stenn said, "to take care of the heroics."

"If you've got any better ideas it's time to speak up, Stenn. This is your only out, the way I see it."

Stenn looked at the man with the gun.

"You referred to someone named 'Maxy.' Would that by any chance be Mr. Max Arena?"

Slim looked at him and thought about it.

"Could be," he said.

Stenn came slowly over to the Slav. Standing well out of the line of fire, he carefully put a hand in the loose pocket of the weather suit and brought out the pistol. I saw Slim's eyes tighten. He was having to make some tough decisions in a hurry.

Stenn moved offside, pistol in hand.

"Move away from him, Smith," he said.

I didn't know what he had in mind, but it didn't seem like the time to argue. I moved back.

"Drop your gun," he said.

I risked a glance at his mild expression.

"Are you nuts?"

"I came here to see Mr. Arena," he said. "This seems an excellent opportunity."

"Does it? I—"

"Drop it now, Smith. I won't warn you again."

I dropped it.

Slim swiveled on Stenn. He was still in an awkward spot.

"I want you to take me to Mr. Arena," Stenn said. "I have a proposition to put before him." He lowered the gun and handed it to Heavy.

It seemed like a long time until Slim lowered his gun.

"Heavy, put him in the back seat." He motioned me ahead, watched me as he climbed in the T-Bird.

"Nice friends you got, mug," he said. The T-Bird started up, backed, and roared off toward the city. I stood under the polyarcs and watched the tail glare out of sight.

Max Arena was the man I had come to the city to find.

III

Old number 16 was canted against the deflector rail, one side shredded into curled strips of crumpled metal. I looked closer. Under the flimsy fairings, gray armor showed. Maybe there was more to Haug's best hack than met the eye. I climbed in and kicked over the starter. The turbos sounded as good as ever. I eased the gyros in; she backed off the rail with a screech of ripped metal.

I had lost my customer, but I still had wheels.

The smart thing to do now would be to head back out the turnpike to Haug's lot, turn in my badge and keep moving, south. I could give up while I was still alive. All I had to do was accept the situation.

I had a wide choice. I could sign on with the New Confeds, or the Free Texans, or any one of the other splinter republics trying to set up shop in the power vacuum. I might try to get in to one of the Enclaves and convince its Baron he needed another trained bodyguard. Or I could take a post with one of the king-pins in the city.

As a last resort I could go back and find a spot in the Naples organization. I happened to know they had a vacancy.

I was just running through mental exercises to hear myself think. I couldn't settle for the kind of world I had found when I touched planet three months back, after eight years in deep space with Hayle's squadron. When the Interim Administration shot him for treason, I burned my uniform and disappeared. My years in the Service had given me a tough hide and a knack for staying alive; my worldly assets consisted of the clothes I stood in, my service pistol and a few souvenirs of my travels. For two months I had been scraping along on the cash I had in my pocket, buying drinks for drifters in cheap bars, looking for a hint, any lead at all, that would give me a chance to do what had to be done. Max Arena was the lead. Maybe a dud lead—but I had to find out.

The city lights loomed just a few miles away. I was wasting time sitting here; I steered the hack out into the highway and headed for them.

Apparently Lefty's influence didn't extend far beyond the South Radial. The two roadblocks I

passed in the next five miles took my money, accepted my story that I was on my way to pick up a fare, said to say hello to Haug and passed me on my way.

Haug's sour yellow color scheme seemed to carry some weight with the town Organizations, too. I was well into the city, cruising along the third level Crossover, before I had any trouble. I was doing about fifty, watching where I was going and looking for the Manhattan Intermix, when a battered Gyrob four-seater trundled out across the fairway and stopped. I swerved and jumped lanes; the Gyrob backed, blocking me. I kicked my safety frame down and floor-boarded the hack, steering straight for him. At the last instant he tried to pull out of the way.

He was too late.

I clipped him across his aft quarter, and caught a glimpse of the underside of the car as it stood on its nose, slammed through the deflector and over the side. Old 16 bucked and I got a good crack across the jaw from the ill-fitting frame, and then I was screeching through the Intermix and out onto the Manhattan Third level.

Up ahead, the glare panels at the top of the Blue Tower reared up half a mile into the wet night sky. It wasn't a hard address to find. Getting inside would be another matter.

I pulled up a hundred yards from the dark cave they used to call the limousine entrance and looked the situation over. The level was deserted—like the whole city seemed, from the street. But there were lights in the windows, level after level of them stretching up and away as far as you could see. There were plenty of people in the city—about ten million, even after the riots and the Food Scare and the collapse of legal government. The automated city supply system had gone on working, and the Kingpins, the big time criminals, had stepped in and set things up to suit their tastes. Life went on—but not out in the open. Not after dark.

I knew almost nothing about Arena. Judging from his employees, he was Kingpin of a prosperous outfit. The T-Bird was an expensive late model, and the two thugs handled themselves like high-priced talent. I couldn't expect to walk into his HQ without jumping a few hurdles. Maybe I should have invited myself along with Stenn and his new friends. On the other hand, there were advantages to arriving unannounced.

It was a temptation to drive in, with the hack's armor between me and any little surprises that might be waiting, but I liked the idea of staging a surprise of my own. I eased into drive and moved along to a parking ramp, swung around and down and stopped in the shadow of the retaining wall.

I set the brake and took a good look around. There was nothing in sight. Arena might have a power cannon trained on me from his bedroom window, for all I knew, but I had to get a toe into the water sometime. I shut down the turbo, and in the silence popped the lid and stepped out. The rain had stopped, and the moon showed as a bright spot on the high mist. I felt hungry and a little bit unreal, as though this were happening to somebody else.

I moved over to the side of the parking slab, clambered over the deflector rail and studied the shadows under the third level roadway. I could barely make out the catwalks and service ways. I was wondering whether to pull off my hard-soled shoes for the climb when I heard footsteps, close. I gauged the distance to the hack, and saw I couldn't make it. I got back over the rail and waited.

He came into sight, rangy, shock-haired and preternaturally thin in tight traditional dress.

When he got close I saw that he was young, in his early twenties at most. He would be carrying a knife.

"Hey, Mister," he whined. "Got a cigarette?"

"Sure, young fellow," I said, sounding a little nervous. I threw in a shaky laugh to help build the picture. I took a cigarette from a pack, put the pack back in my pocket, held the weed out. He strutted up to me, reached out and flipped the cigarette from my fingers. I edged back and used the laugh again.

"Hey, he liked that," the punk whined. "He thinks that's funny. He got a sense of humor."

"Heh, heh," I said. "Just out getting a little air."

"Gimme another cigarette, funny man."

I took the pack out, watching. I got out a cigarette and held it gingerly, arm bent. As he reached for it, I drew back. He snatched for it. That put him in position.

I dropped the pack, clenched my two hands together, ducked down and brought them up hard under his chin. He backflipped, rolled over and started crawling.

I let him go.

I went over the rail without stopping to think it over and crossed the girder to the catwalk that ran under the boulevard above. I groped my way along to where the service way branched off for the Blue Tower, then stopped and looked up. A strip of luminous sky showed between the third level and the facade of the building. Anybody watching from the right spot would see me cross, walking on the narrow footway. It was a chance I'd have to take. I started to move out, and heard running feet. I froze.

The feet slid to a stop on the level above, a few yards away.

"What's up, Crackers?" somebody growled.

"The mark sapped me down."

That was interesting. I had been spotted and the punk had been sent to welcome me. Now I knew where I stood. The opposition had made their first mistake.

"He was starting to cross under when I spot him," Crackers went on, breathing heavily. "He saps me and I see I can't handle him and I go for help."

Someone answered in a guttural whisper. Crackers lowered his voice. It wouldn't take long now for reinforcements to arrive and flush me out. I edged farther and chanced a look. I saw two heads outlined above. They didn't seem to be looking my way, so I started across, walking silently toward a narrow loading platform with a wide door opening from it.

Below me, a lone light reflected from the wet pavement of the second level, fifty feet down; the blank wall of the Blue Tower dropped past it sheer to the glistening gutters at ground level. Then I was on the platform and trying the door.

It didn't open.

It was what I should have expected. Standing in the full light from the glare panel above the entry, I felt as exposed as a fan-dancer's navel. There was no time to consider alternatives. I grabbed my power pistol, flipped it to beam fire and stood aside with an arm across my face. I gave the latch a blast, then kicked the door hard. It was solid as a rock. Behind and above me, I heard Crackers yell.

I beamed the lock again, tiny droplets of molten metal spattering like needles against my face and hand. The door held.

"Drop it and lift 'em, mug," a deep voice yelled. I twisted to look up at the silhouettes against the deflector rail. I recognized the Slavic face of the man called Heavy. So he could talk after all.

"You're under my iron, mug," he called. "Freeze or I'll burn you."

I believed him, but I had set something in motion that couldn't stop now. There was nothing to go back to; the only direction for me was on the way I was headed—deeper into trouble. I was tired of being the mouse in a cat's game. I had taken the initiative and I was keeping it.



I turned, set the power pistol at full aperture, and poured it to the armored door. Searing heat reflected from the barrier, smoke boiled, metal melted and ran. Through the stink of burning steel, I smelled scorched hair—and felt heat rake the back of my neck and hands. Heavy was beaming me at wide aperture, but the range was just too far for a fast kill. The door sagged and fell in. I jumped through the glowing opening, hit the floor and rolled to damp out my

smouldering coat.

I got to my feet. There was no time now to stop and feel the pain of my burns. They would expect me to go up—so I would go down. The Blue Tower covered four city blocks and was four hundred stories high. There was plenty of room in it for a man to lose himself.

I ran along the corridor, found a continuous service belt and hopped on, lay flat, rode it through the slot. I came out into the light of the service corridor below, my gun ready, then down and around again. I saw no one.

It took ten minutes to cover the eighteen floors down to the sub-basement. I rolled off the belt and looked around.

The whole space was packed with automatics; the Blue Tower was a self-sufficient city in itself. I recognized generators, heat pumps, air plants. None of them were operating. The city services were all still functioning, apparently. What it would be like in another ten or twenty years of anarchy was anybody's guess. But when the city systems failed the Blue Tower could go on on its own.

Glare panels lit the aisles dimly. I prowled along looking for an elevator bank. The first one I found indicated the car at the hundred-eightieth floor. I went on, found another indicating the twentieth. While I watched, the indicator moved, started down. I was getting ready to duck when it stopped at the fifth. I waited; it didn't move.

I went around to the side of the bank, found the master switch. I went back, punched for the car. When the door whooshed open, I threw the switch.

I had to work fast now. I stepped into the dark car, reached up and slid open the access panel in the top, then jumped, caught the edge and pulled myself up. The glare panels inside the shaft showed me the pony power pack on top of the car, used by repairmen and inspectors when the main power was off. I lit a per-match to read the fine print on the panel. I was in luck. It was a through car to the four-hundredth. I pushed a couple of buttons, and the car started up. I lay flat behind the machinery.

As the car passed the third floor feet came into view; two men stood beyond the transparent door, guns in their hands, watching the car come up. They didn't see me. One of them thumbed the button frantically. The car kept going.

There were men at almost every floor now. I went on up, passed the hundredth floor, the one-fiftieth, and kept going. I began to feel almost safe—for the moment.

I was gambling now on what little I knew of the Blue Tower from the old days when all the biggest names congregated there. The top floor was a lavish apartment that had been occupied by a retired fleet admiral, a Vice-President and a uranium millionaire, in turn. If I knew anything about Kingpins, that's where Max Arena would hang his hat.

The elevator was slow. Lying there I had time to start thinking about my burned hide. My scalp was hit worst, and then my hands; and my shoulders were sticking to the charred coat. I had been travelling on adrenalin since Heavy had beamed me, and now the reaction was starting to hit.

It would have to wait; I had work to do.

Just below the three hundred and ninety-eighth floor I punched the button and the car stopped. I stood up, feeling dizzy. I grabbed for the rungs on the wall, hung on. The wall of the shaft seemed to sway ... back...

Sure, I told myself. The top of the building sways fifteen feet in a high wind. Why shouldn't I feel it? I dismissed the thought that it was dead calm outside now, and started up the ladder.

It was a hard climb. I hung on tight, and concentrated on moving one hand at a time. The collar of my coat rasped my raw neck. I passed up the 398th and 9th—and rammed my head smack against a dead end. No service entry to the penthouse. I backed down to the 399th.

I found the lever and eased the door open, then waited, gun in hand. Nothing happened. I couldn't wait any longer. I pushed the door wide, stepped off into the hall. Still nobody in sight, but I could hear voices. To my left a discreet stair carpeted in violet velvet eased up in a gentle curve. I didn't hesitate; I went up.

The door at the top was an austere slab of bleached teak. I tried the polished brass lever; the door swung open silently, and I stepped across the threshold and was looking across a plain of honey-colored down at a man sitting relaxed in a soft chair of pale leather.

He waved a hand cheerfully. "Come on in," he said.

Max Arena was a broad-shouldered six-footer, with clean-shaven blue jaws, coarse gray-flecked black hair brushed back from a high forehead, a deeper tan than was natural for the city in November, and very white teeth. He was showing them now in a smile. He waved a hand toward a chair, not even glancing at the gun in my hand. I admired the twinkle of light on the polished barrel of a Norge stunner at his elbow and decided to ignore it too.

"I been following your progress with considerable interest," Arena said genially. "The boys had orders not to shoot. I guess Luvitch sort of lost his head."

"It's nothing," I said, "that a little skin graft won't clear up in a year or so."

"Don't feel bad. You're the first guy ever made it in here under his own steam without an invitation."

"And with a gun in his hand," I said.

"We won't need guns," he said. "Not right away."

I went over to one of the big soft chairs and sat down, put the gun in my lap.

"Why didn't you shoot as I came in?"

Arena jiggled his foot. "I like your style," he said. "You handled Heavy real good. He's supposed to be my toughest boy."

"What about the combat car? More friends of yours?"

"Nah," he said, chuckling easily. "Some Jersey boys heard I had a caller. They figured to knock him off on general principles. A nifty." He stopped laughing. "The Gyrob was mine; a remoted job. Nice piece of equipment. You cost me real dough tonight."

"Gee," I said. "That's tough."

"And besides," he said, "I know who you are."

I waited. He leaned over and picked something off the table. It was my wallet.

"I used to be in the Navy myself. Academy man, believe it or not. Almost, anyway. Kicked out three weeks before graduation. A frame. Well, practically a frame; there was plenty of guys doing what I was doing."

"That where you learned to talk like a hood?"

For a second Arena almost didn't smile.

"I am perfectly capable of expressing myself like a little gentleman, when I feel so inclined," he said, "but I say to hell with it."

"You must have been before my time," I said.

"A year or two. And I was using a different name then. But that wasn't my only hitch with the Service. When the Trouble started, I enlisted. I wanted some action. When the Navy found out they had a qualified Power Section man on their hands, I went up fast. Within fourteen months I was a J. G. How about that?"

"Very commendable."

"So that's how I knew about the trick I. D. under the emulsion on the snapshot. You should have ditched it, Maclamore. Or should I say Captain Maclamore?"

My mouth opened, but I couldn't think of a snappy answer to that one. I was in trouble. I had meant to play it by ear once I reached Arena to get the information I needed. That was out now. He knew me. He had topped my aces before I played them.

Suddenly Arena was serious. "You came to the right man, Maclamore. You heard I had one of your buddies here, right? I let the word leak; I thought it might bring more of you in. I was lucky to get Admiral Hayle's deputy."

"What do you want with me?"

Arena leaned forward. "There were eight of you. Hayle and his aide, Wolfgang, were shot when they wouldn't spill to the Provisional Government—or whatever that mob calls itself. Margan got himself killed in some kind of tangle near Denver. The other four boys pulled a fast one and ducked out with the scout you guys came back in. They were riding dry tanks—the scout had maybe thirty ton/hours fuel aboard—so they haven't left the planet. That leaves you stranded. With six sets of Federal law looking for you. Right?"

"I can't argue with what's in the newspapers," I said.

"Well, I don't know. I got a couple newspapers. But here's where I smell a deal, Maclamore. You want to know where that scout boat is. Played right, you figure you got a good chance of a raid on an arsenal or a power plant to pick up a few slugs of the heavy stuff; then you high-tail out, join up with the rest of the squadron and, with the ordnance you pack, you can sit off and dictate the next move." Arena leaned back and took a deep breath. His eyes didn't leave me.

"Okay. I got one of you here. I found out something from him. He gave me enough I know you boys got something up your sleeve. But he don't have the whole picture. I need more info. You

can give it to me. If I like what I hear, I'm in a position to help—like, for example, with the fuel problem. And you cut me in for half. Fair enough?"

"Who is it you've got?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"What did he tell you?"

"Not enough. What was Hayle holding out? You birds found something out there. What was it?"

"We found a few artifacts on Mars," I said. "Not Martian in origin; visitors. We surveyed—"

"Don't string me, Maclamore. I'm willing to give you a fair deal, but if you make it tough for me —"

"How do you know I haven't got a detonator buried under my left ear," I said. "You can't pry information out of me, Arena."

"I think you want to live, Maclamore. I think you got something you want to live for. I want a piece of it."

"I can make a deal with you, Arena," I said. "Return me and my shipmate to our scout boat. Fuel us up. You might throw in two qualified men to help handle the ship—minus their black-jacks, preferably—then clear out. We'll handle the rest. And I'll remember, with gratitude."

Arena was silent for a long moment.

"Yeah, I could do that, Maclamore," he said finally. "But I won't. Max Arena is not a guy to pick up the crumbs—or wait around for handouts. I want in. All the way in."

"This time you'll have to settle for what you can get, Arena." I put the gun away and stood up.

I had a feeling I would have to put it over now or not at all.

"The rest of the squadron is still out there. If we don't show, they'll carry on alone. They're supplied for a century's operation. They don't need us."

That was true up to a point. The squadron had everything—except fuel.

"You figure you got it made if you can get your hands on that scout-boat," Arena said. "You figure to pick up fuel pretty easy by knocking off say the Lackawanna Pile."

"It shouldn't be too tough; a fleet boat of the Navy packs a wallop."

Arena tapped his teeth with a slim paper-cutter.

"You're worried your outfit will wind up Max Arena's private Navy, right? I'll tell you something. You think I'm sitting on top of the world, huh? I own this town, and everybody in it. All the luxury and fancy dinners and women I can use. And you know what? I'm bored."

"And you think running the Navy might be diverting?"

"Call it whatever you want to. There's something big going on out there, and I don't plan to be left out."

"Arena, when I clear atmosphere, we'll talk. Take it or leave it."

The smile was gone now. Arena looked at me, rubbing a finger along his blue cheek.

"Suppose I was to tell you I know where your other three boys are, Maclamore?"

"Do you?" I said.

"And the boat," Arena said. "The works."

"If you've got them here, I want to see them, Arena. If not, don't waste my time."

"I haven't exactly got 'em here, Maclamore. But I know a guy that knows where they are."

"Yeah." I said.

Arena looked mad. "Okay, I'll give it to you, Maclamore. I got a partner in this deal. Between us we got plenty. But we need what you got, too."

"I've made my offer, Arena. It stands."

"Have I got your word on that, Maclamore?" He stood up and came over to stand before me. "The old Academy word. You wouldn't break that, would you Maclamore?"

"I'll do what I said."

Arena walked to his desk, a massive boulder of Jadeite, cleaved and polished to a mirror surface. He thumbed a key.

"Send him in here," he said.

I waited. Arena sat down and looked across at me.

Thirty seconds passed and then the door opened and Stenn walked in.

Stenn glanced at me. "Well," he said. "Mr. Smith."

"The Smith routine is just a gag," Arena said. "His name is—Maclamore."

For an instant, I thought I saw a flash of expression on Stenn's face. He crossed the room and sat down.

"Well," he said. "A very rational move, your coming here. I trust you struck a profitable bargain?" He looked hard at me, and this time there was expression. Hate, I would call it, offhand.

"Not much of a deal at that, Stenn," Arena said. "The captain is a tough nut to crack. He wants my help with no strings attached. I think I'm going to buy it."

"How much information has he given you?"

Arena laughed. "Nothing," he said. "Max Arena going for a deal like that. Funny, huh? But that's the way the fall-out fogs 'em."

"And what have you arranged?"

"I turn him loose, him and Williams. I figure you'll go along, Stenn, and let him have the three guys you got. Williams will tell him where the Scout boat is, so there's no percentage in your holding out."

"What else?"

"What else is there?" Arena spread his hands. "They pick up the boat, fuel up—someplace—and they're off. And the captain here gives me the old Academy word he cuts me in, once he's clear."

There was a long silence. Arena smiled comfortably; Stenn sat calmly, looking at each of us in turn. I crossed my fingers and tried to look bored.

"Very well," Stenn said. "I seem to be presented with a *fait accompli*...."

I let a long breath out. I was going to make it....

"... But I would suggest that before committing yourself, you take the precaution of searching Mr. Maclamore's person. One never knows."

I could feel the look on my face. So could Arena.

"So," he said. "Another nifty." He didn't seem to move, but the stunner was in his hand. He wasn't smiling now, and the stunner caught me easily.

V

The lights came on, and I blinked, looking around the room.

My mementos didn't look like much, resting in the center of Arena's polished half-acre of desk top. The information was stored in the five tiny rods, less than an inch long, and the projector was a flat polyhedron the size of a pill-box. But the information they contained was worth more than all the treasure sunk in all the seas.

"This is merely a small sample," Stenn said. "The star surveys are said to be unbelievably complete. They represent a mapping task which would require a thousand years."

"The angles," Arena said. "Just figuring the angles will take plenty time."

"And this is what you almost let him walk out with," Stenn said.

Arena gave me a slashing look.

"Don't let your indignation run away with you, Arena," Stenn said. "I don't think you remembered to mention the fuel situation to Mr. Maclamore, did you?"

Arena turned to Stenn, looming over the smaller man. "Maybe you better button your lip," he said quietly. "I don't like the way you use it."

"Afraid I'll lower you in the gentleman's esteem?" Stenn said. He looked Arena in the eye.

"Nuts to the gentleman's esteem," Arena said.

"You thought you'd squeeze me out, Arena," Stenn said. "You didn't need me any more. You intended to let Maclamore and Williams go and have them followed. There was no danger of an escape, since you knew they'd find no fuel."

He turned to me. "During your years in space, Mr. Maclamore, technology moved on. And politics as well. Power fuels could be used to construct bombs. Ergo, all stations were converted for short half-life secondaries, and the primary materials stored at Fort Knox. You would have found yourself fuelless and therefore helpless. Mr. Arena would have arrived soon thereafter to seize the scout-boat."

"What would he want with the boat without fuel?" I asked.

"Mr. Arena was foresighted enough to stock up some years ago," Stenn said. "I understand he has enough metal hoarded to power your entire squadron for an indefinite time."

"Why tell this guy that?" Arena asked. "Kick him to hell out of here and let's get busy. You gab too much."

"I see that I'm tacitly reinstated as a partner," Stenn said. "Most gratifying."

"Max Arena is no welcher," Arena said. "You tipped me to the tapes, so you're in."

"Besides which you perhaps sense that I have other valuable contributions to make."

"I figure you to pull your weight."

"What are your plans for Mr. Maclamore?"

"I told you. Kick him out. He'll never wise up and cooperate with us."

"First, you'd better ask him a few more questions."

"Why? So he'll blow his head off and mess up my rug, like...." Arena stopped. "You won't get anything out of him."

"A man of his type has a strong aversion to suicide. He won't die to protect trivial information. And if he does—we'll know there's something important being held out."

"I don't like messy stuff," Arena said.

"I'll be most careful," Stenn said. "Get me some men in here to secure him to a chair, and we'll have a nice long chat with him."

"No messy stuff," Arena repeated. He crossed to his desk, thumbed a lever and spoke to someone outside.

Stenn was standing in front of me.

"Let him think he's pumping you," he hissed.

"Find out where his fuel is stored. I'm on your side." Then Arena was coming back, and Stenn was looking at me indifferently.

Arena had overcome his aversion to messy stuff sufficiently to hit me in the mouth now and then during the past few hours. It made talking painful, but I kept at it.

"How do I know you have Williams?" I said.

Arena crossed to his desk, took out a defaced snapshot.

"Here's his I. D." he said. "Take a look." He tossed it over. Stenn held it up.

"Let me talk to him."

"For what?"

"See how he feels about it," I mumbled. I was having trouble staying awake. I hadn't seen a bed for three days. It was hard to remember what information I was supposed to get from Arena.

"He'll join in if you do," Arena said. "Give up. Don't fight. Let it happen."

"You say you've got fuel. You're a liar. You've got no fuel."

"I got plenty fuel, wise guy," Arena yelled. He was tired too.

"Lousy crook," I said. "Can't even cheat a little without getting caught at it."

"Who's caught now, swabbie?" Arena was getting mad. That suited me.

"You're a lousy liar, Arena. You can't hide hot metal. Even Stenn ought to know that."

"What else was in the cache, Maclamore?" Stenn asked—for the hundredth time. He slapped me—also for the hundredth time. It jarred me and stung. It was the last straw. If Stenn was acting, I'd help him along. I lunged against the wires, swung a foot and caught him under the ribs. He oofed and fell off his chair.

"Don't push me any farther, you small-time chiselers," I yelled. "You've got nothing but a cast brass gall to offer. There's no hole deep enough to hide out power metal, even if a dumb slob like you thought of it."

"Dumb slob?" Arena barked. "You think a dumb slob could have built the organization I did, put this town in his hip pocket? I started stock-piling metal five years ago—a year before the ban. No hole deep enough, huh? It don't need to be so deep when it's got two feet of lead shielding over it."

"So you smuggled a few tons of lead into the Public Library and filed it under Little Bo Peep."

"The two feet was there ahead of me, wisenheimer. Remember the Polaris sub that used to be drydocked at Norfolk for the tourists to rubberneck?"

"Decommissioned and sold for scrap," I said. "Years ago."

"But not scrapped. Rusted in a scrapyard for five years. Then I bought her—beefed up her shielding—loaded her and sank her in ten fathoms of water in Cartwright Bay."

"That," Stenn said, "is the information we need."

Arena whirled. Stenn was still sitting on the floor. He had a palm gun in his hand, and it was pointed at the monogram on Arena's silk shirt.

"A cross," Arena said. "A lousy cross...."

"Move back, Arena." Stenn got to his feet, eyes on Arena.

"Where'd you have the stinger stashed?"

"In my hand. Stop there."

Stenn moved over to me. Eyes on Arena, he reached for the twisted ends of wire, started loosening them.

"I don't want to be nosey," I said. "But just where the hell do you fit into this, Stenn?"

"Naval Intelligence," Stenn said.

Arena cursed. "I knew that name should have rung a bell. Vice Admiral Stenn. The papers said you got yours when the Navy was purged."

"A few of us eluded the net."

Arena heaved a sigh.

"Well, fellows," he said—and jumped.

Stenn's shot went wild, and Arena left-hooked him down behind the chair. As he followed, Stenn came up fast, landed a hard left, followed up, drove Arena back. I yanked at my wires. Almost—

Then Arena, a foot taller, hammered a brutal left-right, and Stenn sagged. Carefully Arena aimed a right cross to the jaw. Stenn dropped.

Arena wiped an arm across his face.

"The little man tried, Mister. Let's give him that."

He walked past my chair, stooped for Stenn's gun. I heaved, slammed against him, and the light chair collapsed as we went over. Arena landed a kick, then I was on my feet, shaking a slat loose from the dangling wire. Arena stepped in, threw a whistling right. I ducked it, landed a hard punch to the midriff, another on the jaw. Arena backed, bent over but still strong. I couldn't let him rest. I was after him, took two in the face, ducked a haymaker that left him wide open just long enough for me to put everything I had in an uppercut that sent him back across his fancy desk. He sprawled, then slid onto the floor.

I went to him, kicked him lightly in the ribs.

"Where's Williams," I said. I kept kicking and asking. After five tries, Arena shook his head and tried to sit up. I put a foot in his face and he relaxed. I asked him again.

"You didn't learn this kind of tactics at the Academy," Arena whined.

"It's the times," I said. "They have a coarsening effect."

"Williams was a fancy-pants," Arena said. "No guts. He pulled the stopper."

"Talk plainer," I said, and kicked him again, hard—but I knew what he meant.

"Blew his lousy head off," Arena yelled. "I gassed him and tried scop on him. He blew. He was out cold, and he blew."

"Yeah," I said. "Hypnotics will trigger it."

"Fancy goddam wiring job," Arena muttered, wiping blood from his face.

I got the wire and trussed Arena up. I had to clip him twice before I finished. I went through his pockets, looked at things, recovered my souvenirs. I went over to Stenn. He was breathing.

Arena was watching. "He's okay, for crissake," he said. "What kind of punch you think I got?"

I hoisted Stenn onto my shoulder.

"So long, Arena," I said. "I don't know why I don't blow your brains out. Maybe it's that Navy Cross citation in your wallet."

"Listen," Arena said. "Take me with you."

"A swell idea," I said. "I'll pick up a couple of tarantulas, too."

"You're trying for the hack, right?"

"Sure. What else?"

"The roof," he said. "I got six, eight rotos on the roof. One high-speed job. You'll never make the hack."

"Why tell me?"

"I got eight hundred gun boys in this building alone. They know you're here. The hack is watched, the whole route. You can't get through."

"What do you care?"

"If the boys bust in here after a while and find me like this.... They'll bury me with the wires still on, Maclamore."

"How do I get to the roof?"

He told me. I went to the right corner, pushed the right spot, and a panel slid aside. I looked back at Arena.

"I'll make a good sailor, Maclamore," he said.

"Don't crawl, Arena," I said. I went up the short stair, came out onto a block-square pad.

Arena was right about the rotos. Eight of them. I picked the four-place Cad, and got Stenn tied in. He was coming to, muttering. He was still fighting Arena, he thought.

"... I'll hold ... you ... get out...."

"Take it easy, Stenn," I said. "Nothing can touch this bus. Where's the boat?" I shook him. "Where's the boat, Stenn?"

He came around long enough to tell me. It wasn't far—less than an hour's run.

"Stand by, Admiral," I said. "I'll be right back."

"Where ... you...."

"We need every good man we can get," I said. "And I think I know a guy that wants to join the Navy."

EPILOGUE

Admiral Stenn turned away from the communicator screen.

"I think we'd be justified in announcing victory now, Commodore." As usual, he sounded like a professor of diction, but he was wearing a big grin.

"Whatever you say, chief," I said, with an even sappier smile.

I made the official announcement that a provisional Congress had accepted the resignations of all claims by former office holders, and that new elections would be underway in a week.

I switched over to Power Section. The NCO in charge threw me a snappy highball. Damned if he wasn't grinning too.

"I guess we showed 'em who's got the muscle, Commodore," he said.

"Your firepower demonstration was potent, Max," I said. "You must have stayed up nights studying the tapes."

"We've hardly scratched the surface yet," he said.

"I'll be crossing back to *Alaska* now, Mac," Stenn said.

I watched him move across the half-mile void to the flagship. Five minutes later the patrol detail broke away to take up surveillance orbits. They would be getting all the shore leave for the next few years, but I was glad my squadron had been detailed to go with the flagship on the Deep Space patrol. I wanted to be there when we followed those star surveys back to where their makers came from. Stenn wasn't the man to waste time, either. He'd be getting under way any minute. It was time to give my orders. I flipped the communicator key to the squadron link-up.

"Escort Commander to Escort," I said. "Now hear this...."

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