

An abstract painting with a complex, swirling composition of colors including dark blues, greys, greens, yellows, and reds. The brushstrokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is one of intense energy and emotional intensity.

Supermind

Mark Phillips

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In 1914, it was enemy aliens.

In 1930, it was Wobblies.

In 1957, it was fellow travelers.

In 1971, it was insane telepaths.

And, in 1973:

"We don't know *what* the hell it is," said Andrew J. Burris, Director of the FBI. He threw his hands in the air and looked baffled and confused.

Kenneth J. Malone tried to appear sympathetic. "What what is?" he asked.

Burris frowned and drummed his fingers on his big desk. "Malone," he said, "make sense. And don't stutter."

"Stutter?" Malone said. "You said you didn't know what it was. What the hell it was. And I wanted to know what it was."

"That's just it," Burris said. "I don't know."

Malone sighed and repressed an impulse to scream. "Now wait a minute, Chief—" he started.

Burris frowned again. "Don't call me Chief," he said.

Malone nodded. "Okay," he said. "But if you don't know what it is, you must have some idea of what you don't know. I mean, is it larger than a breadbox? Does it perform helpful tasks? Is it self-employed?"

"Malone," Burris sighed, "you ought to be on television."

"But—"

"Let me explain," Burris said. His voice was calmer now, and he spoke as if

he were enunciating nothing but the most obvious and eternal truths. "The country," he said, "is going to hell in a handbasket."

Malone nodded again. "Well, after all, Chief—"

"Don't call me Chief," Burris said wearily.

"Anything you say," Malone agreed peacefully. He eyed the Director of the FBI warily. "After all, it isn't anything new," he went on. "The country's always been going to hell in a handbasket, one way or another. Look at Rome."

"Rome?" Burris said.

"Sure," Malone said. "Rome was always going to hell in a handbasket, and finally it—" He paused. "Finally it did, I guess," he said.

"Exactly," Burris said. "And so are we. Finally." He passed a hand over his forehead and stared past Malone at a spot on the wall. Malone turned and looked at the spot, but saw nothing of interest. "Malone," Burris said, and the FBI agent whirled around again.

"Yes, Ch—Yes?" he said.

"This time," Burris said, "it isn't the same old story at all. This time it's different."

"Different?" Malone said.

Burris nodded. "Look at it this way," he said. His eyes returned to the agent. "Suppose you're a congressman," he went on, "and you find evidence of inefficiency in the government."

"All right," Malone said agreeably. He had the feeling that if he waited around a little while everything would make sense, and he was willing to wait. After all, he wasn't on assignment at the moment, and there was nothing pressing waiting for him. He was even between romances.

If he waited long enough, he told himself, Andrew J. Burris might say something worth hearing. He looked attentive and eager. He considered leaning over the desk a little, to look even more eager, but decided against it; Burris might think he looked threatening. There was no telling.

"You're a congressman," Burris said, "and the government is inefficient. You

find evidence of it. What do you do?"

Malone blinked and thought for a second. It didn't take any longer than that to come up with the old, old answer. "I start an investigation," he said. "I get a committee and I talk to a lot of newspaper editors and magazine editors and maybe I go on television and talk some more, and my committee has a lot of meetings—"

"Exactly," Burris said.

"And we talk a lot at the meetings," Malone went on, carried away, "and get a lot of publicity, and we subpoena famous people, just as famous as we can get, except governors or presidents, because you can't—they tried that back in the Fifties, and it didn't work very well—and that gives us some more publicity, and then when we have all the publicity we can possibly get—"

"You stop," Burris said hurriedly.

"That's right," Malone said. "We stop. And that's what I'd do."

"Of course, the problem of inefficiency is left exactly where it always was," Burris said. "Nothing's been done about it."

"Naturally," Malone said. "But think of all the lovely publicity. And all the nice talk. And the subpoenas and committees and everything."

"Sure," Burris said wearily. "It's happened a thousand times. But, Malone, that's the difference. It isn't happening this time."

There was a short pause. "What do you mean?" Malone said at last.

"This time," Burris said, in a tone that sounded almost awed, "they want to keep it a secret."

"A secret?" Malone said, blinking. "But that's—that's not the American way."

Burris shrugged. "It's un-congressman-like, anyhow," he said. "But that's what they've done. Tiptoed over to me and whispered softly that the thing has to be investigated quietly. Naturally, they didn't give me any orders—but only because they know they can't make one stick. They suggested it pretty strongly."

"Any reasons?" Malone said. The whole idea interested him strangely. It was

odd—and he found himself almost liking odd cases, lately. That is, he amended hurriedly, if they didn't get *too* odd.

"Oh, they had reasons, all right," Burriss said. "It took a little coaxing, but I managed to pry some loose. You see, every one of them found inefficiency in his own department. And every one knows that other men are investigating inefficiency."

"Oh," Malone said.

"That's right," Burriss said. "Every one of them came to me to get me to prove that the goof-ups in his particular department weren't his fault. That covers them in case one of the others happens to light into the department."

"Well, it must be *somebody's* fault," Malone said.

"It isn't theirs," Burriss said wearily, "I ought to know. They told me. At great length, Malone."

Malone felt a stab of honest pity. "How many so far?" he asked.

"Six," Burriss said. "Four representatives, and two senators."

"Only two?" Malone said.

"Well," Burriss said, "the Senate is so much smaller. And, besides, we may get more. As a matter of fact, Senator Lefferts is worth any six representatives all by himself."

"He is?" Malone said, puzzled. Senator Lefferts was not one of his favorite people. Nor, as far as he knew, did the somewhat excitable senator hold any place of honor in the heart of Andrew J. Burriss.

"I mean his story," Burriss said. "I've never heard anything like it— at least, not since the Bilbo days. And I've only heard about those," he added hurriedly.

"What story?" Malone said. "He talked about inefficiency—"

"Not exactly," Burriss said carefully. "He said that somebody was out to get him—him, personally. He said somebody was trying to discredit him by sabotaging all his legislative plans."

"Well," Malone said, feeling that some comment was called for, "three cheers."

"That isn't the point," Burriss snapped. "No matter how we feel about Senator Lefferts or his legislative plans, we're sworn to protect him. And he says 'they' are out to get him."

"They?" Malone said.

"You know," Burriss said, shrugging. "The great 'they.' The invisible enemies all around, working against him."

"Oh," Malone said. "Paranoid?" He had always thought Senator Lefferts was slightly on the batty side, and the idea of real paranoia didn't come as too much of a surprise. After all, when a man was batty to start out with ... and he even *looked* like a vampire, Malone thought confusedly.

"As far as paranoia is concerned," Burriss said, "I checked with one of our own psych men, and he'll back it up. Lefferts has definite paranoid tendencies, he says."

"Well, then," Malone said, "that's that."

Burriss shook his head. "It isn't that simple," he said. "You see, Malone, there's some evidence that somebody *is* working against him."

"The American public, with any luck at all," Malone said.

"No," Burriss said. "An enemy. Somebody sabotaging his plans. Really."

Malone shook his head. "You're crazy," he said.

Burriss looked shocked. "Malone, I'm the Director of the FBI," he said. "And if you insist on being disrespectful—"

"Sorry," Malone murmured. "But—"

"I am perfectly sane," Burriss said slowly. "It's Senator Lefferts who's crazy. The only trouble is, he has evidence to show he's not."

Malone thought about odd cases, and suddenly wished he were somewhere else. Anywhere else. This one showed sudden signs of developing into something positively bizarre. "I see," he said, wondering if he did.

"After all," Burriss said, in a voice that attempted to sound reasonable, "a paranoid has just as much right to be persecuted as anybody else, doesn't he?"

"Sure," Malone said. "Everybody has rights. But what do you want me to do about that?"

"About their rights?" Burriss said. "Nothing, Malone. Nothing."

"I mean," Malone said patiently, "about whatever it is that's going on."

Burriss took a deep breath. His hands clasped behind his head, and he looked up at the ceiling. He seemed perfectly relaxed. That, Malone knew, was a bad sign. It meant that there was a dirty job coming, a job nobody wanted to do, and one Burriss was determined to pass off on him. He sighed and tried to get resigned.

"Well," the FBI director said, "the only actual trouble we can pinpoint is that there seem to be a great many errors occurring in the paperwork. More than usual."

"People get tired," Malone said tentatively.

"But computer-secretary calculating machines don't," Burriss said. "And that's where the errors are, in the computer-secretaries down in the Senate Office Building. I think you'd better start out there."

"Sure," Malone said sadly.

"See if there's any mechanical or electrical defect in any of those computers," Burriss said. "Talk to the computer technicians. Find out what's causing all these errors."

"Yes, sir," Malone said. He was still trying to feel resigned, but he wasn't succeeding very well.

"And if you don't find anything—" Burriss began.

"I'll come right back," Malone said instantly.

"No," Burriss said. "You keep on looking."

"I do?"

"You do," Burriss said. "After all, there has to be *something* wrong."

"Sure," Malone said, "if you say so. But—"

"There are the interview tapes," Burriss said, "and the reports the Congressmen brought in. You can go through those."

Malone sighed. "I guess so," he said.

"And there must be thousands of other things to do," Burriss said.

"Well—" Malone began cautiously.

"You'll be able to think of them," Burriss said heartily. "I know you will. I have confidence in you, Malone. Confidence."

"Thanks," Malone said sadly.

"You just keep me posted from time to time on what you're doing, and what ideas you get," Burriss said. "I'm leaving the whole thing in your hands, Malone, and I'm sure you won't disappoint me."

"I'll try," Malone said.

"I know you will," Burriss said warmly. "And no matter how long it takes, I know you'll succeed."

"No matter how long it takes?" Malone said hesitantly.

"That's right!" Burriss said. "You can do it, Malone! You can do it."

Malone nodded slowly. "I hope so," he said. "Well, I—Well, I'll start out right away, then."

He turned. Before he could make another move Burriss said, "Wait!"

Malone turned again, hope in his eyes. "Yes, sir?" he said.

"When you leave—" Burriss began, and the hope disappeared. "When you leave," he went on, "please do one little favor for me. Just one little favor, because I'm an old, tired man and I'm not used to things any more."

"Sure," Malone said. "Anything, Chief."

"Don't call me—"

"Sorry," Malone said.

Burriss breathed heavily. "When you leave," he said, "please, please use the door."

"But—"

"Malone," Burriss said, "I've tried. I've really tried. Believe me. I've tried to get used to the fact that you can teleport. But—"

"It's useful," Malone said, "in my work."

"I can see that," Burriss said. "And I don't want you to, well, to stop doing it."

By no means. It's just that it sort of unnerves me, if you see what I mean. No matter how useful it is for the FBI to have an agent who can go instantaneously from one place to another, it unnerves me." He sighed. "I can't get used to seeing you disappear like an overdried soap bubble, Malone. It does something to me, here." He placed a hand directly over his sternum and sighed again.

"I can understand that," Malone said. "It unnerved me, too, the first time I saw it. I thought I was going crazy, when that kid—Mike Fueyo—winked out like a light. But then we got him, and some FBI agents besides me have learned the trick." He stopped there, wondering if he'd been tactful. After all, it took a latent ability to learn teleportation, and some people had it, while others didn't. Malone, along with a few other agents, did. Burris evidently didn't, so he couldn't teleport, no matter how hard he tried or how many lessons he took.

"Well," Burris said, "I'm still unnerved. So please, Malone, when you come in here, or go out, use the door. All right?"

"Yes, sir," Malone said. He turned and went out. As he opened the door, he could almost hear Burris' sigh of relief. Then he banged it shut behind him and, feeling that he might as well continue with his spacebound existence, walked all the way to the elevator, and rode it downstairs to the FBI laboratories.

The labs, highly efficient and divided into dozens of departments, covered several floors. Malone passed through the Fingerprint section, filled with technicians doing strange things to great charts and slides, and frowning over tiny pieces of material and photographs. Then came Forgery Detection, involving many more technicians, many more slides and charts and tiny pieces of things and photographs, and even a witness or two sitting on the white bench at one side and looking lost and somehow civilian. Identification Classified was next, a great barn of a room filled with index files. The real indexes were in the sub-basement; here, on microfilm, were only the basic divisions. A man was standing in front of one of the files, frowning at it. Malone went on by without stopping.

Cosmetic Surgery Classification came next. Here there were more indexes, and there were also charts and slides. There was an agent sitting on a bench

looking bored while two female technicians—classified as O&U for Old and Ugly in Malone's mind—fluttered around him, deciding what disguises were possible, and which of those was indicated for the particular job on hand. Malone waved to the agent, whom he knew very slightly, and went on. He felt vaguely regretful that the FBI couldn't hire prettier girls for Cosmetic Surgery, but the trouble was that pretty girls fell for the Agents, and vice versa, and this led to an unfortunate tendency toward only handsome and virile-looking disguises. The O&U division was unfortunate, he decided, but a necessity.

Chemical Analysis (III) was next. The Chemical Analysis Section was scattered over several floors, with the first stages up above. Division III, Malone remembered, was devoted to nonpoisonous substances, like clay or sand found in boots or trouser cuffs, cigar ashes and such. They were placed on the same floor as Fingerprints to allow free and frequent passage between the sections on the problems of plastic prints, made in putty or like substances, and visible prints, made when the hand is covered with a visible substance like blood, ketchup or glue.

Malone found what he was looking for at the very end of the floor. It was the Computer Section, a large room filled with humming, clacking and buzzing machines of an ancient vintage, muttering to themselves as they worked, and newer machines which were smaller and more silent. Lights were lighting and bells were ringing softly, relays were relaying and the whole room was a gigantic maze of calculating and control machines. What space wasn't filled by the machines themselves was filled by workbenches, all littered with an assortment of gears, tubes, spare relays, transistors, wires, rods, bolts, resistors and all the other paraphernalia used in building the machines and repairing them. Beyond the basic room were other, smaller rooms, each assigned to a particular kind of computer work.

The narrow aisles were choked here and there with men who looked up as Malone passed by, but most of them gave him one quick glance and went back to work. A few didn't even do that, but went right on concentrating on their jobs. Malone headed for a man working all alone in front of a workbench, frowning down at a complicated-looking mechanism that seemed to have neither head nor tail, and prodding at it with a long, thin screwdriver. The man was thin, too, but not very long; he was a little under average

height, and he had straight black hair, thick-lensed glasses and a studious expression, even when he was frowning. He looked as if the mechanism were a student who had cut too many classes, and he was being kind but firm with it.

Malone managed to get to the man's side, and coughed discreetly. There was no response.

"Fred?" he said.

The screwdriver waggled a little. Malone wasn't quite sure that the man was breathing.

"Fred Mitchell," he said.

Mitchell didn't look up. Another second passed.

"Hey," Malone said. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Fred," he said in a loud, reasonable-sounding voice, "the State Department's translator has started to talk pig-Latin."

Mitchell straightened up as if somebody had jabbed him with a pin. The screwdriver waved wildly in the air for a second, and then pointed at Malone. "That's impossible," Mitchell said in a flat, precise voice. "Simply impossible. It doesn't have a pig-Latin circuit. It can't possibly—" He blinked and seemed to see Malone for the first time. "Oh," he said. "Hello, Malone. What can I do for you?"

Malone smiled, feeling a little victorious at having got through the Mitchell armor, which was almost impregnable when there was a job in hand. "I've been standing here talking to you for some time."

"Oh, have you?" Mitchell said. "I was busy." That, obviously, explained that. Malone shrugged.

"I want you to help me check over some calculators, Fred," he said. "We've had some reports that some of the government machines are out of kilter, and I'd like you to go over them for me."

"Out of kilter?" Fred Mitchell said. "No, you can forget about it. It's absolutely unnecessary to make a check, believe me. Absolutely. Forget it." He smiled suddenly. "I suppose it's some kind of a joke, isn't it?" he said, just a trifle uncertainly. Fred Mitchell's world, while pleasant, did not include

much humor, Malone knew. "It's supposed to be funny," he said in the same flat, precise voice.

"It isn't funny," Malone said.

Fred sighed. "Then they're obviously lying," he said, "and that's all there is to it. Why bother me with it?"

"Lying, Fred?" Malone said.

"Certainly," Fred said. He looked at the machinery with longing.

Malone took a breath. "How do you know?" he said.

Fred sighed. "It's perfectly obvious," he said in a patient tone. "Since the State Department translator has no pig-Latin circuit, it can't possibly be talking pig-Latin. I will admit that such a circuit would be relatively easy to build, though it would have no utility as far as I can see. Except, of course, for a joke." He paused. "Joke?" he said, in a slightly uneasy tone.

"Sure," Malone said. "Joke."

Mitchell looked relieved. "Very well, then," he began. "Since—"

"Wait a minute," Malone said. "The pig-Latin is a joke. That's right. But I'm not talking about the pig-Latin."

"You're not?" Mitchell asked, surprised.

"No," Malone said.

Mitchell frowned. "But you said—" he began.

"A joke," Malone said. "You were perfectly right. The pig-Latin is a joke." He waited for Fred's expression to clear, and then added: "But what I want to talk to you about isn't."

"It sounds very confused," Fred said after a pause. "Not at all the sort of thing that—that usually goes on."

"You have no idea," Malone said. "It's about the political machines, all right, but it isn't anything as simple as pig-Latin." He explained, taking his time over it.

When he had finished, Fred was nodding his head slowly. "I see," he said. "I understand just what you want me to do."

"Good," Malone said.

"I'll take a team over to the Senate Office Building," Fred said, "and check the computer-secretaries there. That way, you see, I'll be able to do a full running check on them without taking any one machine out of operation for too long."

"Sure," Malone said.

"And it shouldn't take long," Fred went on, "to find out just what the trouble is." He looked very confident.

"How long?" Malone asked.

Fred shrugged. "Oh," he said, "five or six days."

Malone repressed an impulse to scream. "Days?" he said. "I mean—well, look, Fred, it's important. Very important. Can't you do the job any faster?"

Fred gave a little sigh. "Checking and repairing all those machines," he said, "is an extremely complex job. Sometimes, Malone, I don't think you realize quite how complex and how delicate a job it is to deal with such a high-order machine. Why—"

"Wait a minute," Malone said. "Check and repair them?"

"Of course," Fred said.

"But I don't want them repaired," Malone said. Seeing the look of horror on Fred's face, he added hastily, "I only want a report from you on what's wrong, whether they are actually making errors or not. And if they are making errors, just what's making them do it. And just what kind of errors. See?"

Fred nodded very slowly. "But I can't just leave them there," he said piteously. "In pieces and everything. It isn't right, Malone. It just isn't right."

"Well, then," Malone said with energy, "you go right ahead and repair them, if you want to. Fix 'em all up. But you can do that after you make the report to me, can't you?"

"I—" Fred hesitated. "I had planned to check and repair each machine on an individual basis."

"The Congress can allow for a short suspension," Malone said. "Anyhow, they can now, or as soon as I get the word to them. Suppose you check all the

machines first, and then get around to the repair work."

"It's not the best way," Fred demurred.

Malone discovered that it was his turn to sigh. "Is it the fastest?" he said.

Fred nodded.

"Then it's the best," Malone said. "How long?"

Fred rolled his eyes to the ceiling and calculated silently for a second.

"Tomorrow morning," he announced, returning his gaze to Malone.

"Fine," Malone said. "Fine."

"But—"

"Never mind the buts," Malone said hurriedly. "I'll count on hearing from you tomorrow morning."

"All right."

"And if it looks like sabotage," Malone added, "if the errors aren't caused by normal wear and tear on the machines, you let me know right away. Phone me. Don't waste an instant."

"I'll—I'll start right away," Fred said heavily. He looked sadly at the mechanism he had been working on, and put his screwdriver down next to it. It looked to Malone as if he were putting flowers on the grave of a dear departed. "I'll get a team together," Fred added. He gave the mechanism and screwdriver one last fond parting look, and tore himself away.

Malone looked after him for a second, thinking of nothing in particular, and then turned in the opposite direction and headed back toward the elevator. As he walked, he began to feel more and more pleased with himself. After all, he'd gotten the investigation started, hadn't he?

And now all he had to do was go back to his office and read some reports and listen to some interview tapes, and then he could go home.

The reports and the interview tapes didn't exactly sound like fun, Malone thought, but at the same time they seemed fairly innocent. He would work his way through them grimly, and maybe he would even indulge his most secret vice and smoke a cigar or two to make the work pass more pleasantly. Soon enough, he told himself, they would be finished.

Sometimes, though, he regretted the reputation he'd gotten. It had been bad enough in the old days, the pre-1971 days when Malone had thought he was just lucky. Burris had called him a Boy Wonder then, when he'd cracked three difficult cases in a row. Being just lucky had made it a little tough to live with the Boy Wonder label. After all, Malone thought, it wasn't actually as if he'd done anything.

But since 1971 and the case of the Telepathic Spy, things had gotten worse. Much worse. Now Malone wasn't just lucky any more. Instead, he could teleport and he could even foretell the future a little, in a dim sort of way. He'd caught the Telepathic Spy that way, and when the case of the Teleporting Juvenile Delinquents had come up he'd been assigned to that one too, and he'd cracked it. Now Burris seemed to think of him as a kind of God, and gave him all the tough dirty jobs.

And if he wasn't just lucky any more, Malone couldn't think of himself as a fearless, heroic FBI agent, either. He just wasn't the type. He was ... well, talented. That was the word, he told himself: talented. He had all these talents and they made him look like something spectacular to Burris and the other FBI men. But he wasn't, really. He hadn't done anything really tough to get his talents; they'd just happened to him.

Nobody, though, seemed to believe that. He heaved a little sigh and stepped into the waiting elevator.

There were, after all, he thought, compensations. He'd had some good times, and the talents did come in handy. And he did have his pick of the vacation schedule lately. And he'd met some lovely girls...

And besides, he told himself savagely as the elevator shot upward, he wasn't going to do anything except return to his office and read some reports and listen to some tapes. And then he was going to go home and sleep all night, peacefully. And in the morning Mitchell was going to call him up and tell him that the computer-secretaries needed nothing more than a little repair. He'd say they were getting old, and he'd be a little pathetic about it; but it wouldn't be anything serious. Malone would send out orders to get the machines repaired, and that would be that. And then the next case would be something both normal and exciting, like a bank robbery or a kidnapping involving a gorgeous blonde who would be so grateful to Malone that...

He had stepped out of the elevator and gone down the corridor without noticing it. He pushed at his own office door and walked into the outer room. The train of thought he had been following was very nice, and sounded very attractive indeed, he told himself.

Unfortunately, he didn't believe it. His prescient ability, functioning with its usual efficient aplomb, told Malone that things would not be better, or simpler, in the morning. They would be worse, and more complicated.

They would be quite a lot worse.

And, as usual, that prescience was perfectly accurate.

The telephone, Malone realized belatedly, had had a particularly nasty-sounding ring. He might have known it would be bad news.

As a matter of fact, he told himself sadly, he had known.

"Nothing at all wrong?" he said into the mouthpiece. "Not with any of the computers?" He blinked. "Not even one of them?"

"Not a thing," Mitchell said. "I'll be sending a report up to you in a little while. You read it; we put them through every test, and it's all detailed there."

"I'm sure you were very thorough," Malone said helplessly.

"Of course we were," Mitchell said. "Of course. And the machines passed every single test. Every one. Malone, it was beautiful."

"Goody," Malone said at random. "But there's got to be something—"

"There is, Malone," Fred said. "There is. I think there's definitely something odd going on. Something funny. I mean peculiar, not humorous."

"I thought so," Malone put in.

"Right," Fred said. "Malone, try and relax. This is a hard thing to say, and it must be even harder to hear, but—"

"Tell me," Malone said. "Who's dead? Who's been killed?"

"I know it's tough, Malone," Fred went on.

"Is everybody dead?" Malone said. "It can't be just one person, not from that tone in your voice. Has somebody assassinated the entire senate? Or the president and his cabinet? Or—"

"It's nothing like that, Malone," Fred said, in a tone that implied that such occurrences were really rather minor. "It's the machines."

"The machines?"

"That's right," Fred said grimly. "After we checked them over and found they were in good shape, I asked for samples of both the input and the output of each machine. I wanted to do a thorough job."

"Congratulations," Malone said. "What happened?"

Fred took a deep breath. "They don't agree," he said.

"They don't?" Malone said. The phrase sounded as if it meant something momentous, but he couldn't quite figure out what. In a minute, he thought confusedly, it would come to him. But did he want it to?

"They definitely do not agree," Fred was saying. "The correlation is erratic; it makes no statistical sense. Malone, there are two possibilities."

"Tell me about them," Malone said. He was beginning to feel relieved. To Fred, the malfunction of a machine was more serious than the murder of the entire Congress. But Malone couldn't quite bring himself to feel that way about things.

"First," Fred said in a tense tone, "it's possible that the technicians feeding information to the machines are making all kinds of mistakes."

Malone nodded at the phone. "That sounds possible," he said. "Which ones?"

"All of them," Fred said. "They're all making errors—and they're all making about the same number of errors. There don't seem to be any real peaks or valleys, Malone; everybody's doing it."

Malone thought of the Varsity Drag and repressed the thought. "A bunch of fumblebums," he said. "All fumbling alike. It does sound unlikely, but I guess it's possible. We'll get after them right away, and—"

"Wait," Fred said. "There is a second possibility."

"Oh," Malone said.

"Maybe they aren't mistakes," Fred said. "Maybe the technicians are deliberately feeding the machine with wrong answers."

Malone hated to admit it, even to himself, but that answer sounded a lot more probable. Machine technicians weren't exactly picked off the streets at random; they were highly trained for their work, and the idea of a whole crew of them starting to fumble at once, in a big way, was a little hard to swallow.

The idea of all of them sabotaging the machines they worked on, Malone thought, was a tough one to take, too. But it had the advantage of making some sense. People, he told himself dully, will do nutty things deliberately. It's harder to think of them doing the same nutty things without knowing it.

"Well," he said at last, "however it turns out, we'll get to the bottom of it. Frankly, I think it's being done on purpose."

"So do I," Fred said. "And when you find out just who's making the technicians do such things—when you find out who gives them their orders—you let me know."

"Let you know?" Malone said. "But—"

"Any man who would give false data to a perfectly innocent computer," Fred said savagely, "would—would—" For a second he was apparently lost for comparisons. Then he finished: "Would kill his own mother." He paused a second and added, in an even more savage voice, "And then lie about it!"

The image on the screen snapped off, and Malone sat back in his chair and sighed. He spent a few minutes regretting that he hadn't chosen, early in life, to be a missionary to the Fiji Islands, or possibly simply a drunken bum without any troubles, but then the report Mitchell had mentioned arrived. Malone picked it up without much eagerness, and began going through it carefully.

It was beautifully typed and arranged; somebody on Mitchell's team had obviously been up all night at the job. Malone admired the work, without being able to get enthusiastic about the contents. Like all technical reports, it tended to be boring and just a trifle obscure to someone who wasn't completely familiar with the field involved. Malone and cybernetics were not exactly bosom buddies, and by the time he finished reading through the report he was suffering from an extreme case of ennui.

There were no new clues in the report, either; Mitchell's phone conversation had covered all of the main points. Malone put the sheaf of papers down on his desk and looked at them for a minute as if he expected an answer to leap out from the pile and greet him with a glad cry. But nothing happened.

Unfortunately, he had to do some more work.

The obvious next step was to start checking on the technicians who were

working on the machines. Malone determined privately that he would give none of his reports to Fred Mitchell; he didn't like the idea of being responsible for murder, and that was the least Fred would do to someone who confused his precious calculators.

He picked up the phone, punched for the Records Division, and waited until a bald, middle-aged face appeared. He asked the face to send up the dossiers of the technicians concerned to his office. The face nodded.

"You want them right away?" it said in a mild, slightly scratchy voice.

"Sooner than right away," Malone said.

"They're coming up by messenger," the voice said.

Malone nodded and broke the connection. The technicians had, of course, been investigated by the FBI before they'd been hired, but it wouldn't do any harm to check them out again. He felt grateful that he wouldn't have to do all that work himself; he would just go through the dossiers and assign field agents to the actual checking when he had a picture of what might need to be checked.

He sighed again and leaned back in his chair. He put his feet up on the desk, remembered that he was entirely alone, and swung them down again. He fished in a private compartment in his top desk drawer, drew out a cigar and unwrapped it. Putting his feet back on the desk, he lit the cigar, drew in a cloud of smoke, and lapsed into deep thought.

Cigar smoke billowed around him, making strange, fantastic shapes in the air of the office. Malone puffed away, frowning slightly and trying to force the puzzle he was working on to make some sense.

It certainly looked as though something were going on, he thought. But, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out just what it was. After all, what could be anybody's purpose in goofing up a bunch of calculators the way they had? Of course, the whole thing could be a series of accidents, but the series was a pretty long one, and made Malone suspicious to start with. It was easier to assume that the goof-ups were being done deliberately.

Unfortunately, they didn't make much sense as sabotage, either.

Senator Deeds, for instance, had sent out a ten-thousand-copy form letter to

his constituents, blasting an Administration power bill in extremely strong language, and asking for some comments on the Deeds-Hartshorn Air Ownership Bill, a pending piece of legislation that provided for private, personal ownership, based on land title, to the upper stratosphere, with a strong hint that rights of passage no longer applied without some recompense to the owner of the air. Naturally, Deeds had filed the original with a computer-secretary to turn out ten thousand duplicate copies, and the machine had done so, folding the copies, slipping them into addressed envelopes and sending them out under the Senator's franking stamp.

The addresses on the envelopes, however, had not been those of the Senator's supporters. The letter had been sent to ten thousand stockholders in major airline companies, and the Senator's head was still ringing from the force of the denunciatory letters, telegrams and telephone calls he'd been getting.

And then there was Representative Follansbee of South Dakota. A set of news releases on the proposed Follansbee Waterworks Bill contained the statement that the artificial lake which Follansbee proposed in the Black Hills country "be formed by controlled atomic power blasts, and filled with water obtained from collecting the tears of widows and orphans."

Newsmen who saw this release immediately checked the bill. The wording was exactly the same. Follansbee claimed that the "widows and orphans" phrase had appeared in his speech on the bill, and not in the proposed bill itself. "It's completely absurd," he said, with commendable calm, "to consider this method of filling an artificial lake." Unfortunately, the absurdity was now contained in the bill, which would have to go back to committee for redefinition, and probably wouldn't come up again in the present session of Congress. Judging from the amount of laughter that had greeted the error when it had come to light, Malone privately doubted whether any amount of redefinition was going to save it from a landslide defeat.

Representative Keller of Idaho had made a speech which contained so many errors of fact that newspaper editorials, and his enemies on the floor of Congress, cut him to pieces with ease and pleasure. Keller complained of his innocence and said he'd gotten his facts from a computer-secretary, but this didn't save him. His re-election was a matter for grave concern in his own party, and the opposition was, naturally, tickled. They would not, Malone

thought, dare to be tickled pink.

And these were not the only casualties. They were the most blatant foul-ups, but there were others, such as the mistake in numbering of a House Bill that resulted in a two-month delay during which the opposition to the bill raised enough votes to defeat it on the floor. Communications were diverted or lost or scrambled in small ways that made for confusion—including, Malone recalled, the perfectly horrible mixup that resulted when a freshman senator, thinking he was talking to his girlfriend on a blanked-vision circuit, discovered he was talking to his wife.

The flow of information was being blocked by bottlenecks that suddenly existed where there had never been bottlenecks before.

And it wasn't only the computers, Malone knew. He remembered the reports the senators and representatives had made. Someone forgot to send an important message here, or sent one too soon over there. Both courses were equally disturbing, and both resulted in more snarl-ups. Reports that should have been sent in weeks before arrived too late; reports meant for the eyes of only one man were turned out in triplicate and passed all over the offices of Congress.

Each snarl-up was a little one. But, together, they added up to inefficiency of a kind and extent that hadn't been seen, Malone told himself with some wonder, since the Harding administration fifty years before.

And there didn't seem to be anyone to blame anything on.

Malone thought hopefully of sabotage, infiltration and mass treason, but it didn't make him feel much better. He puffed out some more smoke and frowned at nothing.

There was a knock at the door of his office.

Speedily and guiltily, he swung his feet off the desk and snatched the cigar out of his mouth. He jammed it into a deep ashtray and put the ashtray back into his desk drawer. He locked the drawer, waved ineffectively at the clouds of smoke that surrounded him, and said in a resigned voice: "Come in."

The door opened. A tall, solidly-built man stood there, wearing a fringe of beard and a cheerful expression. The man had an enormous amount of muscle distributed more or less evenly over his chunky body, and a pot-belly that